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SECOND SEPTEMBER NUMBER

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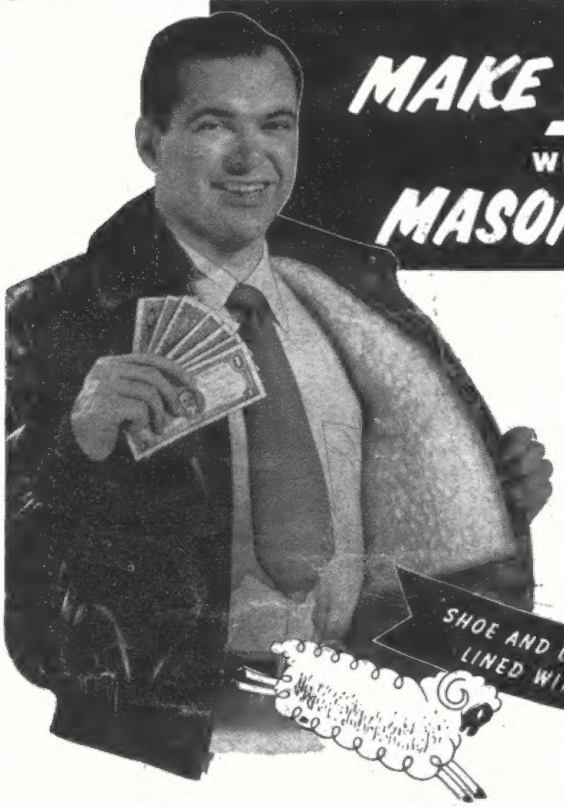

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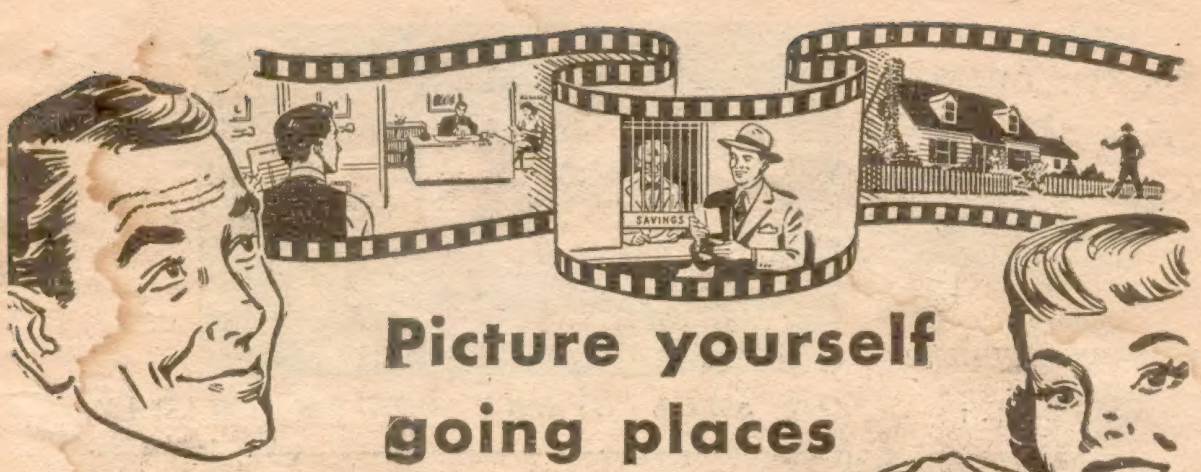

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28th Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
SEPTEMBER NUMBER

September 12, 1952
Volume 174, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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Dear Editor:

I have just had the good fortune to come across an old issue of RANCH ROMANCES in my local bookshop. This is the first copy I've seen since about 1948, for it's very rare we can buy American Western magazines in our part of the world. However, I was glad OUR AIR MAIL is still going strong, for I made one or two good friends in the U.S. through your columns. This issue I have, however, lists 15 names, all but two under 21. And I would like to hear from someone nearer my own age. For the record, I'm 28 years of age, have hazel eyes, auburn hair, stand 5'6" in height, weight 150 lbs. I work in a large furniture store as a dispatch clerk and enjoy it. My main pastimes are dancing and reading every available Western I can get my hands on—which isn't many over here. I would like to hear from any of you readers from age 26 upwards, from the West, Midwest, and Northwest States—I promise an interesting letter to anyone who writes me. I work 44 hours a week, sleep 63 hours—which leaves me 151 hours to play around with. And I can write an awful lot of letters in that time—try me!

ROBERT SUTCLIFFE

29, Sudbury Street
Harpurney
Manchester 9, England

Any Loose Buttons?

Dear Editor:

Whenever I can obtain a copy of your most enjoyable magazine I read it from cover to cover. I think the pen pal page is a really grand idea. I was born 2nd Nov., 1923, am 5'1½", have brown eyes and brown hair. I have tried various types of jobs and have traveled a good bit—home and Europe. I spent 4½ years in the Royal Artillery and saw some action. I have recently begun a uniform button and badge collection—are there any people among your many readers who could help me with my new hobby? I am very keen and would be happy to swap. The sort I collect are soldier, sailor, airmen, firemen, postmen, bus drivers—*any* uniform button or badge. I should be happy to hear from anyone, button collectors or not. Please find space for my letter, and every success to your grand magazine.

JANE NELSON

5 Lion Cottages
Redhill
Surrey, England

Canadian SOS

Dear Editor:

I have just moved to Canada and am lonely. I would like pen pals from all over the world. I am 19 years old, 5'4" tall, auburn hair and hazel eyes.

JANIE RUSH

Box 306
c/o Kama Lodge
Nipigon, Ontario, Canada

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 27 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

GI Needs Pals

Dear Editor:

RANCH ROMANCES is a very popular magazine with the boys of this company. We all enjoy reading it very much. Although reading your magazine for several years, I have never felt the need for pen pals as I do at present. So won't you please publish my plea for pen pals. I am 20 years old with 2 years service, was born and raised in Ohio, stand 5'7" tall, weigh 160 lbs. My hobby is collecting snapshots of girls. I also like fishing, hunting, dancing, and auto racing. So come on all you girls and ship a letter to a lonely Korean soldier.

CPL. HENRY HOOVER, RA 15426798
H&S Co. 65th Engr. (C) Bn.
APO 25, c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

Collector's Items

Dear Editor:

We are two Okies and would like to hear from pals throughout the world. Alyce May likes to write stories and enjoys indoor sports. She is 16. Marilyn LaVon sings hillbilly songs and yodels, and will send snapshots to all. She is 17; hobby is collecting hillbilly songs. We want to hear from everyone, but especially those from the Air Force and Navy.

ALYCE MAY JARVIS

Marilyn Herrold
Box 41
Luther, Oklahoma

Lonesome Gal

Dear Editor:

I need pen pals badly—you see, I was married when I was 18 years old and after two years of it we found it just didn't work out. So now I have very few girl friends that are left single, and I get very lonesome. I am 20 years old, brown hair and blue eyes, 5'6", weight 140 pounds. Won't you please write to a gal who is awfully lonesome?

(Miss) CLEO LAMPEL

1304 Janes
Saginaw, Michigan

Letters for All

Dear Editor:

Could a young man from Ohio get into OUR AIR MAIL? I am 28 years old, 5'8" tall, have blue eyes and brown hair. Like all sports, also dancing, movies, reading, traveling and writing letters, and making friends of all ages. My hobby is collecting phonograph records. Would like to hear from anyone from 16 to 100, and those in a hospital or handicapped—all are welcome and I promise a prompt reply and a long letter.

GEORGE EVANS

Box 245
Elyria, Ohio

What's Cooking?

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for the past 4 years, so you can see your magazine is considered "tops" in our home. I would like to have pen pals. Any age, sex or color. I promise to answer all letters as I have a lot of time to write. My hobbies are drawing, going to shows, and cooking. Will exchange snapshots with any who desire. I'm 28 years of age, red-haired and hazel-eyes. I'm the mother of four children. I love to make friends and keep them too. My husband says any servicemen who would care to write please do so—he will answer all letters. He served in the Navy 3 years in World War II.

MRS. HAROLD FRIX

1247 Chippewah
Cleveland, Tennessee

Snappy Hunter

Dear Editor:

Just received my copy of the 1st July issue of RANCH ROMANCES—I have been a constant reader for some 15 years now. I have written several letters to people in OUR AIR MAIL and was wondering if perhaps you might print my letter. Would sure welcome lots of letters from all over. I am 28 years old and stand 6 feet tall, have brown hair and eyes. My hobby is leathercraft and collecting picture postcards. Am fond of most sports but baseball is my favorite. So come on, Pards, send some mail my way. Will exchange snapshots with all who write.

CHARLES F. WILLIAMS

63 Maple Avenue
New Rochelle, N. Y.

Beached Blonde

Dear Editor:

I am a gal of 17, a junior in high school; my height is 5'8½", blonde hair, baby-blue eyes, a suntan complexion. My favorite sports are basketball and swimming. I live at the beach in the summer and meet lots of new people. I love to write letters and, of course, will answer all I receive. I have lived in Army camps most of my life and I like to hear from service boys as well as others.

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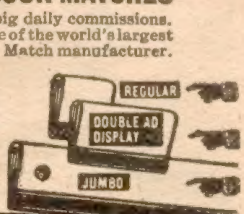

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THE LEGEND THAT Texans, bless 'em, can draw faster than anyone else really backfired on one poor man. He's all right now, but he must have gotten quite a shock the day he saw a snake—and drew his .22 so fast that he shot himself. Incidentally, the snake got away.

UP IN CANADA, a couple of men had an almost legal holiday when they saw a store owner's close-out sale notice that "everything must go." Everything went—$4,000 worth of goods—removed by thieves.

CITIZENS OF ONE Western city got a bonanza recently, after hearing strange noises issuing from the city dumps. A few of the curious went down and found that someone had thrown out about 1,500 turkey eggs, and the warm sun had somehow hatched them. After that the whole town went to the dumps, after the best kind of bargain on fresh-hatched turkeys—free, that is.

SEEMS LIKE JUST about everybody was after this Boise, Idaho, man one gloomy day. First a thief broke a window in his liquor store and raided the cash register. Then his home, in an entirely different part of the city, was broken into and robbed.

IT MUST HAVE been quite a shock to the Santa Fé, N. M., citizen when he was notified that he'd been taken off the voting list because he was dead. He's been allowed to vote, though. They figured, when he told them his boss was paying him for working, that he must be alive enough to vote.

A GROUP of Enid, Okla., high school graduates went out into the world with a rather unusual benediction. After they solemnly planted the traditional ivy, and received the message, "As the ivy grows, so will we grow . . ." they discovered they'd planted poison ivy.

OUT IN DEEP RIVER, Wash., there's one man who can affirm the reports that fish are really biting. While trolling down the Columbia River, trailing his hand in the water, this man got a bite right away—on his hand, though, not on the hook.

A WESTERN man was booked on a charge of drunkenness, after he'd calmly announced that he'd committed a murder. It was lucky no one paid much attention to his confession. He'd made it, he said later, just to get out of the rain.

FROM WILMINGTON, Calif., comes the story of an old tugboat's glorious finale. After a heroic career of pulling a lot of very big ships, tug No. 10 was commissioned to haul a floating barge filled with scantly bathingsuited young ladies, modeling for a style show. Must have been too much of a good thing for the old tug. It got back to its dock, capsized, and sank.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

HIGH NOON

GARY COOPER stars in producer Stanley Kramer's long awaited first Western

IT'S HIGH TIME for *High Noon*. And what we mean by that cryptic sentence is that Western fans have had a long wait for Stanley Kramer's first Western.

Kramer gives a movie all the things that Westerns should have—pace, characterization and tingling excitement—and now at last he has made a Western, *High Noon*, released by United Artists.

When he was unknown he made a prize fight picture, *Champion*, which hit audiences like a haymaker. A more recent picture, *The Sniper*, is about a compulsive killer, and leaves people with the feeling that a carbine is aimed at their backs. Kramer likes toughness in his movies, and the only wonder is that he didn't get around to *High Noon* sooner.

He didn't depend on his own talents alone, however. The cast is crammed with fine performers, led by Gary Cooper, who is supported by Thomas Mitchell, Lloyd Bridges, Otto Kruger, Lon Chaney and Henry Morgan. The top feminine rôles are filled by two newcomers, sultry Katy Jurado as a fiery Mexican girl and blond Grace Kelly as the heroine.

High Noon has plenty of elements you've seen before—a badman looking for revenge, the sheriff's bride pleading with him to avoid violence, the townsfolk too frightened to protect themselves.

But there are some new angles in *High Noon* which make it unlike any Western you've ever seen. All the action takes place on the screen in the same space of time that it would have in real life. The story opens when it's 10:40 a.m. in Hadleyville. An hour and forty minutes later it's 12:20 in Hadleyville and the picture is over. But every minute is crammed with action and suspense, as the sheriff, knowing of the guns he'll face at noon, tries to deputize men to back him. The hands of the clock, creeping toward twelve, make you tense with fearful anticipation.

In most Westerns the common folk fi-

Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly

The fateful telegram arrives, and with it—trouble

nally shake off their fears and help the sheriff fight for justice. But in the whole town of Hadleyville, there's only one person with as much courage as the lawman, and that one person is the last one you'll expect to lift a gun.

Gary Cooper, of course, plays the sheriff. He has represented the law in countless Westerns during his long movie career, but he's never had a part more suited to his brand of taciturn, yet dashing, charm. *High Noon* is Grace Kelly's first movie rôle, but it won't be her last if—and it's a big if—the studios can pry her away from New York.

It's not TV that keeps her in the East, though she's been plenty busy in that field. Her biggest ambition is to star in the theater, and this year she made it. Not many people saw her, because the show closed after a few performances.

Until Grace's blond beauty began brightening television screens all over the country, she mostly shone in reflected glory. Practically all her relatives are famous.

Her father and brother are champion oarsmen. All sports fans know the story of John Kelly's being refused as an entry in a race at Henley, England, because he wasn't a "gentleman." In other words, he hadn't been to college and he'd once been a bricklayer. About 20 years later his son entered the same race and won it.

Grace may get her dramatic bent from a couple of uncles. One is a well-known playwright, another a vaudeville headliner.

Though her Broadway aspirations have fallen short of fulfillment, Grace can hardly complain of the experience she's getting while she waits for her next chance. In video she's played costumed ladies and modern girls; in the space of two weeks this past spring, she played a coed, an heiress and a country schoolteacher. She was afraid, though, that she was hopelessly typed as a nice girl, and the biggest surprise of her life came a few weeks later when she was cast as a dancehall girl, complete with low neckline and black net stockings.

BETH BRIGHT

At Home With ALAN LADD

ALAN LADD'S flourishing career has taken a turn, but whether it's for the better or worse remains to be seen. Having been snugly perched close to the top of the popularity polls for the last several years, Alan might be expected to be content with his Paramount contract. He is, however, a fellow with a mind of his own.

He wanted some say in the choice of his scripts. But the studio was adamantly against that, so Alan settled his old contract with Paramount and signed a new one with Warner Bros., calling for one picture a year for five years at the handsome pay of $150,000 per movie.

His fans will be glad to know that what Alan wants to make is not necessarily *different* movies than he's made in the past, just better ones. And if money makes a better movie, his first one for Warners ought to be a lulu. The figure on the budget is two million dollars.

Alan will play James Bowie, who invented the bowie knife which was the most formidable weapon of the frontier until the sixgun came along. The story is based on the best-selling novel, *The Iron Mistress* by Paul Wellman.

Alan's break with Paramount was amicable on both sides. For instance, he wanted to buy his old dressing room furniture to put into his new dressing room (which once, incidentally was Bette Davis's), but the studio gave it to him as a farewell gift. Also the Ladd ranch has for some years been supplying the Paramount commissary with eggs, and Alan allowed his hens to remain loyal.

As a matter of fact, Alan is a very easy fellow to get along with. His wife, ex-actress and talent agent, Sue Carol, has enjoyed his company for ten years now. There are two little Ladds (one feminine), Alana and David.

There are plenty of obvious reasons why Alan makes a good husband, but also he's neat as a pin—no wet towels lying on the bathroom floor, no socks kicked under the bed.

"Most men thank their wives for a happy marriage," says Alan, "but I have to thank mine for a successful career too. She was the only one who thought I had any possibilities in the movies."

Before he met Sue, Alan had almost lost faith in himself. He took anybody's advice. Once he plucked out his eyebrows because somebody told him they didn't photograph well. Another time somebody told him blonds (men, that is) didn't photograph well, so he went for a screen test with his hair blacked with mascara. Studio lights made Alan perspire and perspiration made the mascara run down his face, and the casting director told him there wasn't any call for minstrel types that day.

In the part that made him a star Alan looked like himself, but he didn't act much like himself. Most movie fans remember him as the deadpan killer in *This Gun for Hire.* And Alan's problem ever since has been to get out from behind that gun. Maybe that's why he's so pleased to play the knife-wielding James Bowie.

At home on his ranch Alan handles nothing more lethal than a hammer. He takes pride in being a handyman and very seldom hits his thumb. The only trouble he gives Mrs. Ladd is that he won't eat breakfast. A cup of coffee and a cigarette satisfy him, but he wants them both the minute he wakes up.

Paramount

The story of Alan Ladd—and the rôle that changed his life

FARMERS KEEP OUT

by RAY GAULDEN

RACE DALLAS could have almost everything he wanted—except that lovely nester girl who wouldn't even talk to him

RACE DALLAS was glad to be back in the saddle after traveling on the narrow-gauge all the way from Denver to Allensville. For three hours he had ridden steadily and now the mountains were all around him, rugged and green with spruce. He would soon be home, back on Wagonwheel, working, sweating, using a rope and a branding iron.

He sat loose in the saddle of his black gelding, a big man, lean and hard-muscled, his square face deeply burned by the wind and the sun of the high country. Up ahead was the pass that led to the valley, his valley, he thought, and felt satisfaction.

Here was the basin, land in need of water, a place long hammered by a harsh sun. There were plowed fields where crops had been planted, corn and potatoes, and Dallas looked at the burned out rows of stalks and felt nothing but contempt.

A year ago they had come to settle here, a small colony from Nebraska, farmers in flat-heeled shoes who hadn't known when they were well off. From the top of the pass, Dallas had watched them build their sod shanties, wondering how long they could hold out.

He felt a grudging admiration because the colonists had stuck this long. The crude houses they had built lay to his left, scattered along a dry creek bed, and Dallas's mouth puckered with distaste as he looked at them.

He did not know these people and he did not want to know them. They kept to themselves, doing their trading at Allensville and staying out of the valley. That was the way he liked it.

Dallas rode on and began the climb over the pass, traveling a narrow trail with rough granite walls rising high on either side of him. When he reached the top, he stopped to let his horse blow, and looked out across the high valley, mile after mile of rich graze as far as he could see. Cattle roamed here, sleek and fat, longhorns wearing the Wagonwheel brand on their flanks, and Dallas smiled as he let his eyes wander.

Close by, Rabbit Creek made a roaring sound as it leaped over boulders on its swift journey toward the valley. It was a stream that would never go dry. And on his right was the sign he had posted: FARMERS KEEP OUT.

He glanced at the sign now and something pulled his gaze beyond it. A girl stood beside an egg-shaped boulder, and he was surprised at finding her here.

THE GIRL was tall and slender, graceful even in linsey trousers and a man's hickory shirt. But it was her face that held Dallas, a high-boned face with a straight nose and a wide mouth. Not really beautiful, he decided, but there was something about her that made him want to keep staring.

She was looking out across the valley and because of the creek's roar she was not aware that Dallas had ridden up. He studied her a moment longer, then said, "You like the looks of my valley?"

She turned and her level gray eyes appraised him. "Your valley?"

He nodded and smiled. "I'm Race Dallas."

"I've heard the name," she said, and her eyes were faintly bitter now. "You own everything this side of the river."

"Not quite," Dallas said, still smiling. "There's the Rogan place over beyond Indian Creek. Nice folks, the Rogans."

The girl's presence made him ill at ease and he reached for his tobacco sack, saying, "I've never seen you before."

"I'm Catherine Lowrie. I come here often, but I've never been in your valley."

"Why?"

The girl turned toward the sign and as

she stared at it the bitterness grew and became a dark shadow in her eyes.

Dallas wet his lips. "You're from the basin?"

"We've been there almost a year, my father and I."

Dallas said with a frown, "Why would you settle on land like that?"

"The man we bought it from painted a pretty picture."

"And now your money's gone and you're stuck with it?"

Catherine Lowrie didn't answer. She turned again to send a wistful gaze across the valley. Dallas studied her, a straight slender figure with russet-colored hair loose about her shoulders. Her skin was brown and he could see that her hands had known hard work.

Following her gaze, Dallas said, "It's cattle country."

The girl's eyes remained fixed on the green land below them. She spoke in a low tone, as if she were talking to herself, "It's such a beautiful place, so big and full of life."

Dallas nodded slowly and said again, "It's cattle country."

She turned then and regarded him with a critical stare. "Do you eat nothing but beef, Mr. Dallas?"

"I like potatoes with it," he said.

"Potatoes have to be grown somewhere."

"But not in my valley."

Their eyes locked and held for a moment and Dallas was aware of the stiffness in her, the quick rise and fall of her breasts. He heard her say with a trace of scorn, "You must be very proud of yourself."

Her attitude stirred a faint irritation in him, and he said, "I've done all right. Started twelve years ago with two hundred head and now I've got the biggest ranch in this part of the country."

"There are other people in the world beside you."

Dallas said with quiet stubbornness. "A man has to look out for himself."

Catherine's eyes were steady and accusing as she said, "Does he have to be selfish?"

Dallas felt heat in his face. This angered him and roughened his voice. "Is it selfish to want to hold what is yours?"

"That depends."

"I'm afraid we don't talk the same language, ma'am."

When she didn't answer, he touched the brim of his stetson and said, "So long, Miss Lowrie. Nice to have met you."

He put his horse down the winding trail and came out into the valley, scowling because he couldn't get the girl out of his mind. There would always be folks like her and her farmer friends, he thought. But he hadn't gotten where he was by feeling sorry for people.

Two weeks he had been gone, seeing the sights in Denver, staying at the Windsor Hotel, talking over range conditions and the price of beef at the Denver stockyards. There had been a good play at the Tabor Grand Opera House, and he had enjoyed his visit, but now he was glad to be home, away from the crowds and the buildings and the talk of silver. This was his country, cattle country, and he wouldn't have traded it for all the mines in Colorado.

IT WAS July and he could see the green leaves on the quaking aspens, slender-bodied little trees that quivered in the breeze. He came to a creek, a swift-flowing stream that twisted its way toward the Aladora River. Wild roses and chokecherries and Indian Paintbrushes grew along the bank, making bright splashes of color against the green floor of the valley.

He followed the creek for a mile and then cut across, his eyes on the cluster of buildings in the distance. That was Wagonwheel. That was home.

He was riding away from the creek, climbing a rise, when something drew his attention back to the stream. A quarter of a mile down, he saw a group of horsemen and the thought came quickly to his mind, "Must be my boys."

Nudging the black gently with his boot heels, Dallas swung back toward the creek. He frowned as he drew closer and saw that the riders were gathered in a tight little knot under a cottonwood tree. The sound

of the black's hoofs caused some of the men to turn, and Dallas recognized Tock Hobart, the Wagonwheel foreman, a short, fat little man, bald except for a red fringe around his ears.

But Dallas was staring at the man in the center of the group, a tall, slab-bodied man with thick black hair and a face that was lean and darkly handsome.

This man had his hands tied behind him and there was a rope around his neck. The rope had been thrown over a limb of the tree and Tock Hobart held one end of it in his hand.

"It seems like you're in a fix, Kyle." Dallas spoke to the man with the rope around his neck.

While Kyle Pruett stared at him sullenly, Dallas looked at his six man crew, saw the grim set of their faces, and turned his attention to Hobart.

The foreman showed him a tight grin. "You just got back in time to join the party, boss. We caught him fixing to slap his iron on a Wagonwheel cow."

Dallas folded his hands over the horn and looked again at Pruett. "How long have you been doing it, Kyle?"

"I thought it was a Rafter P stray."

"He's lying, boss." Tock Hobart cut in. "I've had my eye on this yahoo for a long time, and today we caught him redhanded."

Chris Gerry, a big, heavy-shouldered puncher, said impatiently, "Well, let's get on with it."

"Don't be in such a hurry, Chris," Dallas said mildly.

Gerry shifted his weight in the saddle, a scowl building on his broad face. "Since when do we start fooling around with cow thieves?"

Dallas ignored Gerry and pinned narrowed eyes on Pruett. "Your dad and your brother in on this deal, too, Kyle?"

"Morgan and Arnie don't know anything about it."

"Working on your own, huh? Figured I was away and you'd trim my herd a little."

Kyle's lips twisted. "How did you get such a big herd?"

"Not with a running iron."

"Maybe you can make some folks believe that."

A muscle twitched in Dallas's face. "You're in a bad spot, Kyle."

KYLE PRUETT looked at the half circle of men and his mouth slanted with contempt. "They were just trying to throw a scare into me. They haven't got the guts to go through with it."

Swearing softly, Tock Hobart gave a jerk on the rope. "You think not, huh?"

Kyle stood in the stirrups, his neck twisted. Chris Gerry's eyes held a wicked shine as he moved his horse in beside Pruett's, reached over to slap Pruett's mount on the rump.

"Hold it, Chris," Dallas said. "Tock, ease off on the rope."

"Damn it, boss," Hobart growled. "I don't see why you want to mess with him."

The rope slacked off and Kyle Pruett, sitting back in the saddle, ran his hand around his neck. He didn't look so sure of himself now. His face was gray with strain.

Dallas smiled coldly at him. "Still think they don't mean business?"

"You can't get away with this, mister. We've got law in this country."

"I'm the law this side of the Aladora, Kyle. I run things the way I damn please. And I know how to handle cow thieves."

Pruett wet his lips. "What's a few cows to you? You've got more than you know what to do with."

"And I aim to keep them," Dallas said.

Hobart made an impatient gesture. "All this gabbing ain't getting us nowhere. I say string him up and leave his carcass for the buzzards."

"Them's my sentiments too," Gerry said. "We never used to fool with gents like this down in Texas."

Dallas gave the big puncher a level stare. "This is Colorado, Chris, and you're taking orders from me."

Gerry's face colored, but he shrugged and moved his horse away from Pruett's.

Dallas spoke to Hobart. "Get the rope off his neck, Tock, and you and me'll take him in to the sheriff."

There was a sour expression on Hobart's face as he moved his horse in to take the rope from around Pruett's neck. He said thinly, "All I can say is that you're mighty lucky the boss come along when he did."

A lanky, buck-toothed puncher called Tex, looked at Dallas's gelding, saying, "Better take my horse, boss. Yours looks plumb tuckered."

Dallas nodded. "Take him in with you, Tex. We'll see you boys later."

THEY HEADED for town, Dallas ordering Pruett to take the lead. Hobart and Dallas rode side by side, Dallas astride Tex's buckskin. When they had gone a short distance, Hobart said, "How was things in Denver?"

"Okay, Tock. But I had enough of the bright lights to last me three, four years."

"See any pretty girls?"

"Sure, the town's full of them."

"Then why didn't you bring one home with you?"

"Didn't see any that looked that good, Tock."

"But damn it, why did you go down there?"

"To see the sights. You told me I needed a vacation, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Hobart said. "And I meant it. You've tied yourself down here since you was a kid, working, sweating. And now you've reached the point where you can afford to take things easier."

"I wasn't cut out to take things easy, Tock. I'd go loco and you know it."

"Maybe, but I figure you ought to pay a little more attention to the women. You're twenty-nine now. A good wife might take a little of the steam out of you."

Dallas grinned and shook his head. "How many wives have you had, Tock?"

"Not any, Race." The foreman's sun-puckered eyes held a distant expression. "I never had time for them when I was young like you, and now that I'm too damned old, it bothers me some, mostly at night when I get to thinking and feeling kinda lonesome."

"There's the Widow Jones," Dallas suggested. "She makes a right nice living with her sewing, and she's still looking for a man."

"She can't see a dried-up old cuss like me as long as Pat O'Mally's around."

Dallas smiled. "Pat's afraid to get away from his saloon long enough to go courting. Might be a dime floating around that he wouldn't get his hands on."

"Tightest man I ever saw," Hobart said, and then he scowled at Dallas. "We got off the subject of talking about you."

"Forget about me, Tock. Yonder is Tontoria, and I'll bet she hasn't changed a bit."

Hobart screwed up his face. "You talk about that wide place in the road like it was a real city."

"It's got everything I want, Tock," Dallas murmured.

Kyle Pruett, who had ridden in silence until now, looked over his shoulder and said, "How about untying me? This rawhide's chewing hell out of my wrists."

"You've stood it this long," Dallas told him. "And we'll be at the sheriff's office in a few minutes."

"Yeah, I know," said Kyle Pruett.

SOON THEY reached town and crossed the Aladora River at the end of Main Street, their horses' hoofs clattering sharply on the log bridge. The single street was wide and rutted from wagon wheels. It was the county seat, not a boomtown, and there was only one saloon.

They passed the Widow Jones's place, a small frame house that her husband had built near the river. It was here the woman did her sewing and still found time to take care of the yard and her flowers. The lawn was green and well-kept. Dallas stared at it appreciatively as they passed.

The thick gray dust, kicked up by their horses, rose and settled slowly. Jess Agnew was standing in the doorway of his livery barn. He lifted his hand as he recognized Dallas, and Dallas called, "Hi, Jess?"

Agnew, a gnarled, white-headed little man, turned his attention to Kyle Pruett, who rode stiffly in his saddle, looking straight ahead.

They pulled up in front of the courthouse, a two-story sandstone building with

the sheriff's office and jail on the ground floor, the courtroom and other offices above. Through the open doorway, Dallas could see Orma Baxter sitting in a swivel chair back of a roll-top desk, hands behind his head.

"Wake up, Orma," Dallas called. "We got some business for you."

Baxter took his time coming to the doorway. He was a tall, bony man with brooding shadows in his washed-out eyes. With one shoulder against the door frame, he stood and looked out, his gaze passing over Dallas and Hobart to settle on Pruett. "So you finally kicked over the traces, did you, Kyle?"

Pruett, ignoring the question, said sullenly, "Everybody on the street's staring at me like I was a damned freak. Untie me."

Baxter had a chew of tobacco in the left side of his mouth. He shifted it to his right cheek and turned quizzical eyes on Dallas.

"Tock caught him using a running iron, Orma," Dallas said.

The sheriff's face was troubled when he looked back at Pruett. "I've had my eye on you for a long time, Kyle, you and Arnie both. I told Morgan he better keep you boys in line."

"To hell with all this talk," Pruett said harshly. "Get me inside and untie me."

Hobart glanced down at the saloon, wet his lips and said, "Reckon you don't need me for a few minutes. I'll be down at O'Mally's."

Dallas nodded and dismounted, wrapping his reins around a rack in front of the office. As Hobart was about to ride off, Baxter spoke to him. "You got the iron he was using?"

Hobart reached in his saddlebag and tossed the iron to the lawman, who held it in his hand, lips puckered as he studied it.

"He had it in the fire," Hobart said, "when me and the boys rode up on him."

"Hadn't used the iron though?" Baxter asked.

Dallas felt impatience crowd him. "What difference does it make, Orma? They caught him fixing to use the iron, and that's good enough."

"I reckon you're right, Race."

BOTH OF THE two cells at the back of the office were empty. Baxter untied Pruett's hands and marched him in, and Dallas heard the iron door clang. When Baxter returned to the office Dallas was inspecting an old reward poster on the wall. The sheriff tossed his key ring on the desk and Dallas looked around.

"We won't keep Kyle around long, Race," Baxter said. "I'll see Judge Farnum and arrange to have the trial tomorrow."

"How much time will he get, Orma?"

The sheriff shrugged. "A couple of years, I guess."

"That's too long, Orma. I just want to teach him a lesson."

"You ain't never going to teach Kyle anything. He'd be better off if he was locked up for good."

Dallas came over to the desk. He leaned against it and rolled a smoke. With his eyes on the wheatstraw paper, he said, "Just the same, Orma, you talk to the judge. Tell him to go easy on Kyle."

"If he got a year, he could do it in six months."

"That's good enough."

The sheriff shook his head. "Whatever you say, Race, but I think you're making a mistake. And Morgan ain't going to like this."

"Morgan should have brought up those boys of his better."

"Maybe Morgan tried, Race, but didn't know how to go about it. Sometimes it don't seem to make much difference how you raise them. They'll grow up to be mean just like Arnie and Kyle. Anyway, they're still Morgan's sons, and he can't forget that. Morgan's a stubborn cuss and this ain't going to set well with him."

"I'm not going to worry whether Morgan likes it or not."

Baxter studied Dallas for a moment. "You never worry much about anything, Race."

Dallas said dryly, "I'd better go before you start giving me a sermon."

Baxter grinned then. "How was things in Denver?"

"The town's really growing, Orma.

Arnie went flying back as the fist struck him

They've even got horsedrawn streetcars to carry you around. Too big a place for me."

"Just a small-town boy," Baxter said with a chuckle.

"I reckon," Dallas said, smiling. He turned to leave the office and Baxter walked as far as the doorway with him. "See you later, Orma."

Dallas stepped onto the plank walk, then glanced back. The sheriff was standing in the doorway and his eyes were worried. "Watch yourself, Race," he said in an uneasy tone. "Morgan and Arnie are down at the saloon."

"I'll break the news to them," Dallas answered gravely.

Baxter rubbed the back of his neck, scowling. "You let somebody else tell them about Kyle."

Dallas grinned and didn't answer. Turning up the street he waved to Max Niles who was standing on the porch of his general store, staring absently along the strip of gray dust. Max Niles smiled and gave his floursack apron a tug, saying, "I've got those new levis in that you were asking about, Race."

"Be over later, Max," Dallas told him, and went on toward the saloon.

He passed the Elite Café and glanced in the window, but there was no sign of Mickey, the waitress. Guess she hasn't come on shift yet, he thought.

THERE weren't over a dozen men in the saloon when Dallas entered. He saw Tock Hobart at one end of the bar and walked over to him. Pat O'Mally looked up from drawing a beer, nodded and said, "Glad to see you back, Race."

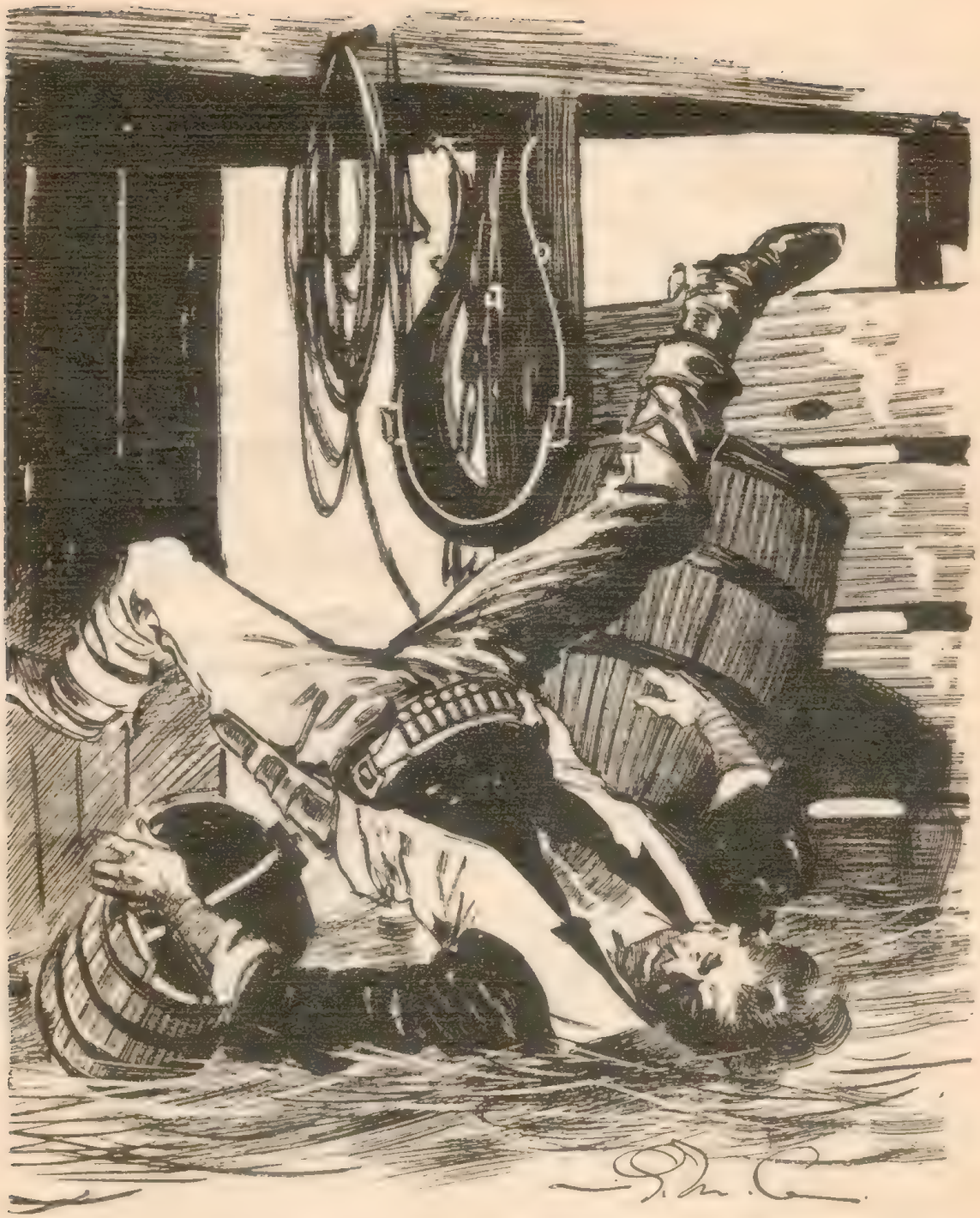
"The whisky's no better in Denver," Race assured him.

The Irishman looked pleased as he served a customer the beer and came back to Dallas and Hobart. There was a quart bottle in front of Hobart and a filled glass in his hand.

"You going to nurse that one all day, Tock?" the saloonman asked as he set a glass out for Dallas.

Hobart took a sip of the whisky and said sourly, "Why don't you let me drink in peace?"

"I can't make no profit on one drink. It costs money to keep this place up."



"You paid for this place the first year you went in business, and you've been socking away plenty ever since," Hobart snorted. "You're so damned tight that you won't even hire any help."

"Ain't got enough business for more than one man," O'Mally argued.

Hobart shook his head. "That ain't the reason. You're afraid you couldn't watch the cash drawer every minute and somebody might get his fingers in it."

Dallas poured himself a drink, watching the two men with amusement. This same argument took place every time Hobart came to town.

Everybody knew that O'Mally held onto

his money, but the man had a good reputation. He ran a clean place and his whisky was hard to beat. There were no gambling devices, only card tables where the customers could play a friendly game of poker. O'Mally supplied the cards and the chips and took a small percentage from each pot.

The drink finished, Dallas put his back to the cherrywood bar and let his eyes roam idly over the room. He saw Morgan and Arnie Pruett at the far end of the bar, drinking and talking with two of the townsmen. A perverse streak in Dallas caused him to say, "Have you seen Kyle, Morgan?"

The words, spoken in a loud voice, caused the murmur of talk around the two men to break off. Morgan Pruett was the closest to Dallas and he turned his head, a faint annoyance in his smoke-colored eyes as he stared down the bar. He was raw-boned, this Morgan, about forty-five, with strength in his face and in the tight line of his mouth.

"Kyle went out looking for strays this morning," Morgan said, "if it's any of your business."

Hobart and O'Mally had stopped talking now as had everyone else in the barroom. The pair of townsmen who stood beside Pruett exchanged glances and began moving back from the bar. A tension settled over the room.

Dallas kept his eyes on Morgan and said, "Kyle must have got lost. My boys found him on Wagonwheel range fixing to slap an iron on one of my cows."

ARNIE PRUETT, standing at his father's right, shoved back from the bar, a quick-moving young man with a reckless shine in his pale eyes. He was Morgan's youngest son, not as tall as Kyle, and for this reason he wore extremely high heels on his boots.

Arnie Pruett's lips made a tight line across his thin face as he slanted a cold stare at Dallas. "Where's Kyle now?" Arnie demanded.

"In jail where he belongs," Dallas said, his words directed at Morgan Pruett.

Surprise widened Morgan's eyes. It faded and temper moved in to take its place. "Kyle ain't a rustler, Dallas. He must have followed a stray over on your range."

"This wasn't any stray," Dallas said. "And Kyle knew it."

"Why, damn you—" Arnie's hand fell to the butt of his gun.

Dallas stepped away from the bar. "Better not go off half-cocked, kid."

Morgan laid a restraining hand on his son's arm. "Come on, Arnie. We'll go down and see Kyle."

For a moment longer Arnie stared at Dallas, resentment strong in his pale eyes. Then Morgan spoke again, sharper this time. "Let's go, Arnie."

The pair strode across the room and outside, their boots making a hard strike against the planking. The doors continued to swing in and out and Dallas watched them until they were still.

Pat O'Mally's breath came out in a long sigh of relief. He said, "That damned Arnie's got an itchy trigger finger."

"He'll get himself killed one of these days," Dallas murmured.

Tock Hobart finished his drink and set the glass down on the bar. He said darkly, "I've got a hunch we're gonna have trouble with them Pruetts."

The tension had drained out of Dallas now. He grinned at his foreman. "We've had trouble before, Tock, and we've never run from it. Come on and let's hit for home. I want to get some of this trail dust washed off."

They stopped at the general store where Dallas bought some levis and talked with Max Niles while Hobart prowled aimlessly through the big room with its smell of leather goods and coffee and kerosene.

They left the store in time to see Morgan and Arnie Pruett riding away from lawyer Lew Sears's office, a few doors down from the courthouse. The two men came past the store and Arnie shot Dallas a cold stare. Hobart swore softly and there was a worried expression on his face as he watched the pair ride out of town.

Dallas grinned and said; "Cheer up, Tock."

They got their horses and were riding

down the street when Dallas saw Lew Sears come to the doorway of his office. Sears was a slender young man, who, until recently, had always been neat in his appearance. Now he needed a shave. His clothes were rumpled and his eyes were red from too much drink.

"Hello, Lew," Dallas said, pulling his horse in. "I saw Morgan and Arnie riding away from here."

Sears nodded. "They hired me to defend Kyle. Is he guilty, Race?"

"Guilty as hell."

"That's what I thought."

Dallas said, "We'll see you around, Lew. . . ."

Sears stood in the doorway, watching the two men ride away. After a moment the lawyer stepped onto the street and turned toward Pat O'Mally's place. He was passing the sheriff's office when Orma Baxter appeared in the doorway and called to him.

"Where you going in such a hurry, Lew?"

"Down to get a drink."

"What's got into you, Lew? You never used to touch the stuff."

"A man can change, can't he?"

The sheriff nodded slowly and glanced toward the Elite. "You ain't going to get nowhere with Mickey, trying to see how much booze you can guzzle."

Sears said with quiet bitterness, "Lay off, will you," and started to go on down the street.

"Wait a minute, Lew. Ain't you going to talk to Kyle?"

Impatience was working on Sears as he turned back to face the lawman. "What do I need to talk to Kyle for?"

"I don't know." Baxter shrugged. "But Kyle's looking for you; said Morgan was going to get you to defend him tomorrow."

"I told Morgan I'd do what I could, but Race says Kyle's guilty."

Baxter massaged an old bullet wound in his left arm, asking, "Does that make a difference to a lawyer?"

"Makes a difference in this case," Sears answered. "Race says he's guilty, and I'm not about to start bucking Race Dallas."

The sheriff smiled dimly. "Reckon we're all in the same canoe. Wagonwheel carries a lot of weight. Of course, I think a heap of Race, but sometimes it rubs me the wrong way when I stop and think that he's running things, telling us all what to do."

Sears looked down at the saloon, wet his lips and said, "Race has treated me right. Helped me get started."

Baxter's eyes turned thoughtful. "Reckon I better round up a jury for tomorrow."

"Yeah," Sears said wryly. "Let's make it look legal."

DALLAS had built his house at the foot of Twin Peaks. It was a big house, made of logs, with a huge rock fireplace, and built to withstand the severe winters of the high country. The five rooms were large and well provided with furniture that had been shipped from Denver to Allensville on the narrow gauge and brought the rest of the way in a freight wagon.

From the long front porch Dallas could look far out across his range, at mile after mile of rich graze. Below the house stood a huge barn and behind it a maze of pole corrals. There were several smaller buildings, a cookshack and a bunkhouse.

Tired from a long day in the saddle, Dallas turned in early and slept soundly until dawn was working into the east. Then he rose, dressed and washed, and had breakfast with the crew in the cookshack.

Tock Hobart, sitting beside Dallas, poured coffee into his saucer and sipped it slowly. He said, "Reckon I'm the star witness at the trial today."

Dallas nodded. "You better go in early."

"You're not coming?"

"Not for the trial. I'll be in later."

Dallas saddled up and rode out alone. The black was rested now and wanted to go. Dallas let him run, enjoying the feel of the early morning air.

He climbed a ridge and hipped around in the saddle to look back at the ranch, liking the sight of it, feeling a sense of pride. He rode on, knowing this land, every trail, every draw and creek as well as he knew the rooms of his house.

He found himself heading toward the pass and he would not admit to himself why he was going. He just wanted to look over the range, to see how the cattle were doing. They looked fat and healthy and Dallas knew they should bring a good price at the fall roundup. He rode along, watching the cattle graze, and all the time he was drawing closer to the basin trail.

At the foot of the pass, he stopped and put a cigarette together. His eyes were on the pass as he ran the wheatstraw paper across his tongue, sealed the smoke and wiped a match aflame on the leg of his levis.

When he had the cigarette going, he put his horse up the trail and there was an odd feeling inside him when he reached the top. He could see the boulder beside which the girl had stood yesterday, and he found himself remembering the way she had looked, the clothes she had worn.

He thought of her name, Catherine Lowrie, and he spoke it softly, liking the sound of it. In his mind, he drew a picture of her, painted her with the wind in her hair and a soft smile on her lips.

She hadn't been smiling yesterday; her eyes had been cool and full of resentment. Remembering this, Dallas felt a faint annoyance with himself. Why had he ridden here?

He was acting like a damned fool. The girl was a farmer and he was a cattleman. He didn't want anything to do with the likes of her. Hadn't he posted a sign at the top of the pass? Others had tried to come into the valley and they hadn't lasted long. That sign meant what it said.

Forget her, fella, she's not for you, he told himself.

HE ROLLED the cigarette out between his thumb and forefinger and rode back the way he had come. When he reached the ranch, there was a hammer-nosed gray in front of the cookshack. Dallas recognized the horse as one belonging to Doc Millard.

Stepping down, Dallas loosened the cinch on his mount and turned toward the cookshack. He noticed Millard's black bag tied to the gray's saddle horn. The medico was sitting at one end of the long table, sipping coffee from a tin cup. He looked around and smiled when Dallas came in.

"Hello, Race."

"Hi, Doc. Don't tell me one of my boys is sick?"

Millard shook his head. He was a middle-aged man, slender and small-boned, with a high forehead and quiet blue eyes. He said, "I just stopped by to get a cup of Biscuit's coffee. It can't be beat."

Biscuit Jones, the cook, was working over the big wood range, stirring something in a large iron kettle. He was a bald, skinny man wearing a floursack apron, and he said without looking around, "I'm sure glad somebody appreciates me."

Dallas grinned. "Can't you do something for his disposition, Doc?"

"I'm afraid it's a hopeless case, Race." Millard set his cup down, a touch of amusement in his eyes as he looked at Biscuit Jones.

The cook turned around, scowling at the two men as he brought the big smoke-blackened coffeepot over to the table and poured Dallas a cup. "Damnedest outfit I ever worked for," he growled.

"You've been here a long time," Millard reminded him.

"Wouldn't any other outfit put up with him," Dallas said, grinning.

Biscuit Jones grumbled, but there was a twinkle in his faded eyes as he went back to the stove.

Millard took a sip of his coffee, said, "I was on my way back to town. Been over to the Rogan place."

"Mrs. Rogan have another spell with her heart?"

Millard nodded soberly. "The woman works too hard. I told her six months ago that she was going to have to ease up, but she says Wilma and Sid can't get the work done without some help."

"How's Sid doing?" Dallas reached for his tobacco sack and started rolling a cigarette.

"Sid's all right. He was getting ready to go to town to serve on the jury at Kyle Pruett's trial this afternoon. Since the sheriff told Sid that you wanted Kyle to

get a year in jail. Sid said he couldn't see any sense of him having to take time off from his work."

"We've got to make it look right, Doc."

"It's a big joke, Race."

Something in the medico's tone caused Dallas to stare at him sharply. "Kyle's guilty, Doc."

"I suppose—"

"Suppose, hell. My men caught him red-handed."

MILLARD stared at him, in earnest. "I'm not doubting your word, Race. It's just that I think a man should be proved guilty by twelve men good and true, men who don't know beforehand what the verdict's going to be."

Dallas looked at the medico through a cloud of smoke. "I'm letting Kyle off easy, Doc. He'd get more than a year if I kept out of it."

"That's probably right," Millard said patiently. "What I'm trying to get across is that I don't think it's good for a country when one man gets so big that he can tell the law how to work."

"I remember when there wasn't any law here, Doc."

Millard nodded. "You've been here a long time, Race; you've done a lot to build the country, but if we're going to go ahead and progress, we've got to have law and courts of justice to decide what's right and wrong."

"You think I'm throwing my weight around too much, is that it?"

A faint smile touched Millard's lips. "It probably never occurred to you, Race, but folks in this valley do just about what you say. If they go to do something, they come to you first and find out if it's all right. At election time they ask you which men you want in office."

"Well, hell, they're all friends of mine, Doc."

"I'm more inclined to think it's because they're afraid of you, Race."

Dallas scowled at him. "I don't like that kind of talk."

[*Turn page*]

"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"
"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND
America's Favorite Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN
LOW AS 29¢ PLUS TAX
BEAMER KELLER

Millard finished his coffee and rose, smiling. "Don't start getting sore, Race. You know me, I say what I think, and we've been friends a long time. If it wasn't for all the business I get digging bullets out of you and your boys, I'd most likely starve to death."

Dallas followed him outside, still ruffled. But when the medico had stepped into the saddle, Dallas's face smoothed out and he said, "I still like you, Doc, even if you do tell me off once in a while."

Millard picked up the reins. "Don't know why I waste my breath. It just goes in one ear and out the other."

Dallas stood there in front of the cookshack staring after the man, his face turning somber as Millard's words came back to him.

TOCK HOBART, who was to be the star witness at Kyle Pruett's trial, got ready to ride into town right after dinner. "The boys and me'll be in later on, Tock," Dallas told him.

Hobart didn't look happy as he tightened the cinch another notch.

Biff Jason, standing in the bunkhouse doorway, grinned and winked at Chris Gerry. "We'll be thinking of you, Tock, sweating it out in that courtroom while we're down at O'Mally's drinking beer."

Gerry laughed and then sobered quickly when Hobart shot him a sharp glance.

Dallas looked on in amusement as Hobart, muttering under his breath, stepped into the saddle. The foreman lifted the reins and glared at Biff. "It ain't funny, fella."

"I feel mighty bad about it," Jason said.

"You better get going, Tock," Dallas said. "We don't want to hold things up."

"No, we don't want to do that," Hobart growled, and rode out of the yard.

Dallas went up to the house and got busy checking the books, a chore that he always put off as long as possible. An hour later, he closed the big ledger, the job still not done, and got ready to go to town.

He was crossing the porch when he saw the rider coming into the yard. It was Catherine Lowrie astride a bony mare.

Dallas stopped on the edge of the porch, a quick pleasure stirring in him as he watched the girl pull up. He smiled at her. "So you decided to ignore my sign."

The girl, wearing the same linsey trousers she had worn yesterday, sat stiffly in a saddle that looked as if it had come from the scrap heap. She regarded Dallas with a grave expression.

"I had to come. There's no doctor at Allensville."

Still smiling, Dallas said, "You look healthy enough. Why—"

"It's my father that's ill."

Dallas sobered. "I'm sorry."

Catherine folded her hands over the horn, her eyes cool and unfriendly. "Is there a doctor in your town?"

He felt his face getting warm, but he grinned and said, "Doc Millard is as good a sawbones as you can find anywhere."

"How far is it to town?"

"Not far. I'll go along and show you the way."

"You needn't bother," Catherine said quickly.

"No bother. I was going in anyway. Soon as I saddle up." He left the porch, not looking back to see whether she was waiting or not.

CATHERINE LOWRIE was waiting in the middle of the yard when Dallas rode to join her. He saw that her eyes were moving over the buildings, the corral and the house.

"What do you think of the layout?"

Catherine was still looking at the house. He thought he detected a touch of bitterness about her mouth as she said, "It's quite a place."

They rode toward town, silent while Catherine stared out across the green acreage. Dallas studied her and he wondered why he had come along. It was plain that she didn't welcome his company. When they had gone a mile or more, he broke the long silence.

"Is your father pretty sick?"

The girl's eyes clouded. "He's been in bed for over a week, and he's a man who doesn't give up easily."

"Your mother still living?"

"No, Mother died on the way out here. She hadn't been well and the trip was too hard on her." Catherine stared moodily into the distance.

They rode a ways, neither of them speaking, and Dallas found it hard to keep his eyes off her. He liked the easy way she sat her saddle, the way she handled the horse. She didn't look like a farmer, he thought, and then wondered what a farmer was supposed to look like.

At last, Catherine, making a slow inspection of the rolling land, spoke again. "What could one man want with all of this?"

"I like a lot of room," Dallas said. "And my cattle need plenty of grass."

He saw the slight tightening of her mouth and once more they rode in silence. For the first time, Dallas wanted to tell somebody the reason he was the way he was. He wanted this girl to know what it was like when he was a kid, the son of a gambler, his mother a honkytonk dancer.

It wasn't easy to take, having people look down their noses at you, cursing you and calling you that damned Dallas brat. They had lived in a shack on the edge of town and sometimes there hadn't been enough to eat. Finally his mother had run away and left them, and his father had been killed in a saloon brawl.

But Ace Dallas had won a lot of money the night he was shot, enough to give his son a start. Race had bought cattle and started a ranch, determined to prove to folks that the son of a tinhorn gambler and a dancehall queen could amount to something.

Somewhere along the way to the top, he had forgotten why he was doing it. All the bitterness was gone from him and he had lived down his name, and he never talked about the past to anyone. He had been hard and tough. And now, looking at Catherine, he wished she knew the reason back of it all. But if he told her, she might feel sorry for him, and he didn't want that.

Catherine didn't talk any more until they reached town and pulled up in front of the doctor's office. She dismounted without waiting for Dallas to help her down, and said simply, "Thank you for your trouble."

"No trouble," Dallas answered. "If there's anything else I can do, let me know."

She gave him a straight look. "You can take down that keep-out sign."

The old stubbornness rose in him and his face stiffened. "I'm not about to do that."

"I didn't think you would," Catherine said, her tone scornful.

He stared after her, scowling as she turned toward the doorway of Millard's office. Then with an angry jerk of the reins, Dallas whirled his horse and rode to the livery stable where he turned the animal over to Jess Agnew.

THERE were buggies and wagons parked around the courthouse and Dallas knew the trial was still in progress. He walked on past the building, finding no interest in it. Doc Millard and the Lowrie girl were leaving the office and Doc lifted his hand to Dallas as they rode by. Catherine did not even glance at him.

Dallas went on down the plank walk, wondering why he couldn't get the girl out of his mind. Who did she think she was, suggesting he take down that sign. He could just see himself letting a bunch of plow-pushers overrun his graze.

He glanced toward the Elite Café where Mickey Chase, the little red-headed waitress, worked. Maybe he should pay more attention to Mickey. She wasn't bad to look at and she was a girl who appreciated him. Thinking about her, the sour mood left Dallas and he was whistling as he headed toward the eating place.

The Widow Jones came out of Hines's Butcher Shop a few doors down, a shopping bag in her hand, and turned up the street, walking briskly toward Dallas.

He tipped his hat when they met. "Howdy, Mrs. Jones."

"Hello, Race." She was a small, pleasant-faced woman somewhere in her late forties. She stopped and looked soberly at him. "Seems like you'd be over at the courthouse."

"I don't like courtrooms," he said, grinning.

The woman's voice was faintly critical. "Could it be you already know how the trial will come out, Race?"

"Why, Mrs. Jones, how can you say that?" He tried to keep his face straight, but there was a touch of devilment in his eyes.

Mrs. Jones shifted the shopping bag to her other hand, regarding him with a sharp intentness. "My husband used to say before he passed away that it would take a woman to tame you, Race."

Dallas, not answering, glanced over her shoulder at the sign in front of the Elite. After a moment he heard the woman saying, "Why don't you get serious about some girl?"

"Everybody keeps trying to marry me off," Dallas said, putting a pained expression on his face. Then he gave her a wry smile, touched the brim of his hat and walked on.

Mrs. Jones sighed and took a firmer grip on the shopping bag. She was shaking her head slowly as she continued on her way.

USUALLY the Elite was jammed on Saturday afternoons, but entering the café now, Dallas found it deserted except for Arnie Pruett and Mickey Chase, the waitress. Arnie was sitting on a stool at the far end of the counter. He looked around and his thin face darkened at sight of Dallas.

With only a glance at Arnie, Dallas turned his attention to Mickey, who was busy putting fresh coffee in the big urn. She was a plump, red-headed girl, well put together, Dallas thought as he looked her over. Her eyes were blue and she knew how to use them on a man.

"Hi, Mickey." Dallas slid onto a stool. "Where's all the customers?"

Mickey put the lid back on the urn and turned around, smiling as she smoothed her dress over her hips. "They're all over at the courthouse, Race. What are you going to have?"

"Too early for supper. Just make it a cup of coffee."

Mickey moved back to the urn and reached for a cup and saucer. Dallas, waiting for her to bring his coffee, glanced along the counter. Arnie Pruett was hunched over a piece of pie and was staring at it moodily.

"Looks like you'd be over at the trial, Arnie," Dallas said.

Arnie's mouth pulled down at one corner. "I was over there, but I couldn't stomach the way it was going."

Dallas moved the sugar bowl around in a circle. "You don't figure Kyle's getting a fair shake?"

"I know damned well he's not."

Mickey gave him a sharp glance. "Watch your language, Arnie."

Arnie, his eyes on Dallas, said sullenly, "He thinks he's somebody."

Without heat, Dallas said, "You're getting pretty worked up, kid."

"Don't call me kid."

Mickey put the cup of coffee in front of Dallas. She looked at Arnie and her eyes were angry. "You're acting like a kid, Arnie."

There was a hot defiance in Arnie's eyes as he looked at the girl. "You think he's something. You're always sticking up for him."

"He's a friend of mine."

Still unruffled, Dallas sipped his coffee. He heard Arnie's fork hit the plate, heard Mickey say, "You didn't finish your pie."

"I lost my appetite," Arnie said. He glared at Dallas, then turned and stalked out of the cafe.

Dallas shook his head and grinned at Mickey. "He's sure hot-headed."

The girl's face was serious. "I don't know what to do about him."

"What do you mean?"

"He keeps trying to get me to go with him. I've come up with every excuse I can think of."

"You don't like him, huh?"

"Can you blame me?"

Dallas frowned at the cup of coffee. "I'm afraid Morgan ain't done a very good job raising them two boys."

Dan Kemp, the man who owned the café, came in then. He nodded to Dallas and went back of the counter where he removed his coat and tied an apron around his waist.

"Better run along, Mickey," he said. "So you can get back."

"I'm working a split shift today," Mickey told Dallas. She removed her apron and came out from behind the counter. "Walk me home, Race?"

"I haven't got anything else to do." He drained the coffee cup, laid a nickel on the counter and stood up. "Besides, I haven't seen your mother in I don't know when."

There was an odd feeling of unease inside him

THEY WENT out and turned up the street, walking toward the little frame house on the edge of town where Mickey and her mother lived. The buggies and wagons were still parked around the courthouse, and looking that way, Dallas said, "You think they'll ever wind it up?"

"Lew's a good lawyer," Mickey answered.

Dallas saw the sober set of her face. "You and Lew used to see a lot of each other."

"He turned me down for a whisky bottle." Mickey tried to make it sound light, but there were shadows in her eyes.

"Maybe you didn't handle him right."

The girl stared straight ahead. "I didn't fall all over him if that's what you mean."

Dallas grinned. "I was thinking about the way you roll those eyes of yours when a strange man comes along. Lew's the serious type. And you've got a little devil in you. Perhaps more than just a little."

"Is that the reason you've steered clear of me, Race?" Mickey's eyes were faintly mocking.

"Why, shucks, I never come to town that I don't drop in at your house."

"Yes, but I've always had the feeling that it was mother's baking that attracted you."

"You're making my mouth water for a piece of one of her lemon pies."

They reached the house and turned in. Mickey called out, "Mom, we've got a visitor. Come see who it is."

When she didn't get an answer, the girl frowned and went toward the back of the house. Dallas stood in the living room and ran his finger idly around the sweatband of his hat. He could hear the click of Mickey's heels as she came back down the hall.

"I guess mother's visiting with one of the neighbor ladies, and there's not a piece of pie in the house."

"Fine thing," he said, grinning. "You get me thinking I'm going to see your mother, and you knew she wasn't here all the time."

"Why you—" Mickey came slowly toward him, her lips tight with simulated anger. Then both of them began to laugh.

After a moment, Dallas sobered and glanced toward the door. "I reckon I better get along so you can rest."

"Don't be in a hurry," Mickey said. "I'm not tired. Besides, I never have a chance to be alone with you."

He shook his head. "You're quite a gal, Mickey. I've never been able to figure you out."

"I didn't think you ever thought about me enough to try."

"I think of you a lot, always wondering when you and Lew are going to get together again."

A fleeting unhappiness crossed the girl's eyes. "I wish you'd forget about Lew. Everything is finished between us."

"All right. What do you want to talk about?"

"About you and me."

SUDDENLY the tone of her voice stirred a small excitement in Dallas. She stopped and looked up at him, her lips moist and slightly parted. Dallas thought of Catherine Lowrie, remembering the way she had looked at him.

A reckless urge seized him and he reached for Mickey. The girl came willingly and her arms slid around his neck. He held her hard against him and kissed her, and her lips were warm and clinging. When he finally let her go, Mickey made no move to step back. Her arms were still around his neck, her supple body tight against his.

"Oh, Race," she whispered. "That's the first time you ever kissed me."

"And the last time," he said, removing her arms from around his neck.

Mickey pouted. "Didn't you like it?"

"Yeah, I liked it, you little hunk of dynamite. I liked it so much that I'm going to get out of here."

"I don't see any harm in having fun."

Dallas stared soberly at her. "But the fun might lead to something we'd both be sorry about later."

Mickey sighed and looked disappointed. Then a rueful smile caught at her lips. "I guess you're right, Race. Go on, you big stiff, and get out of here."

Dallas left the house and turned up the street toward town, unable to get Mickey out of his mind. She had a lot of appeal, but she didn't affect him the way Catherine Lowrie did.

He had known Mickey ever since she was a shiny-nosed kid. He had spent some pleasant hours in the Chase home, visiting with Mrs. Chase. Mickey had talked him into taking her to a few dances and he had looked on in amusement while she flirted with other men. They had never been serious about each other and he knew they never would be.

He walked on and came to the livery stable. Arnie Pruett was standing in the doorway and Dallas had the impression that Arnie had been watching him.

WHEN DALLAS started to walk by, Arnie put his shoulders back and said, "Just a minute." Dallas stopped. He made a quick inspection of the barn, finding no sign of Jess Agnew. He looked at Arnie and saw the hot shine of temper in Arnie's eyes.

"I been standing here for half an hour."

Dallas shrugged. "Stand here the rest of the day. It's all right with me."

The temper grew brighter in Arnie Pruett's eyes. "I happen to know Mrs. Chase ain't home. She's over visiting with Floyd Tyler's wife."

"So what?"

"So that means you and Mickey were alone down there."

"You better ease up," Dallas said between stiff lips. "I don't like what's going on in that dirty little mind of yours."

Arnie's lips slanted. "You think because you got the biggest ranch around here that you own the whole damned country and everybody in it—even the women."

"You talk too much, Arnie."

Pruett was too worked up to stop now. "I got brains enough to know that you weren't down there talking about the weather all that time. You—"

Dallas stepped forward and brought his open hand against Arnie's face. Once, twice, three times Dallas slapped him and the sound was loud and sharp in the stillness. Arnie's head rocked, and he staggered back, cursing, trying to ward off the blows.

They were in the barn now and Dallas drew up, his palm stinging. He said in a tight voice, "Don't ever open that filthy mouth of yours to me again."

Arnie's face was crimson, the marks of Dallas's fingers standing out on it. "Damn you," he said hoarsely, and made a grab for his gun.

Dallas stepped in again and this time his hand was closed, balled into a hard fist. The first struck Arnie in the mouth and sent him flying back as if kicked by a mule. He landed on his back and lay there on the hay-strewn floor of the barn, unmoving.

For a moment, Dallas stood looking down at him, then, turning, he left the barn and walked on down the street.

MOST OF THE buggies and wagons were gone from around the courthouse and he supposed the trial was over. Orma Baxter came out of his office, saw Dallas and cut across the street.

"How'd it go?" Dallas asked.

"Kyle got his year. I'll be taking him down to Canon City first of the week."

Dallas was looking at the courthouse. "How'd Morgan take it?"

"Not good." Baxter looked worried. "He made a big to-do because we didn't have any evidence."

Dallas frowned. "What about the running iron?"

"Somebody stole it out of the office last night—Arnie, I reckon. He probably slipped in while I was out for supper. Anyway, it didn't make any difference." Baxter glanced toward the Elite. "I've got to get a bite to eat. See you later, Race."

Dallas watched the lawman enter the cafe, started to follow, and then drew up as he saw Morgan Pruett appear in the alley next to the courthouse. The man's crew was behind him and they sat their saddles, a tight little group with eyes pinned on the courthouse. They're waiting for something, Dallas thought, and felt uneasy.

Then Lew Sears came out of the courthouse, a briefcase in his hand, and started up the street. Lew saw Morgan Pruett there in the alley and his face turned pale. As he started to hurry on, Morgan's voice, rough and loud, stopped him.

"Hold on, Lew."

Dallas crossed the street, his eyes on Morgan Pruett, watching the man dismount and stride toward Lew Sears. There was a streak of sweat on the lawyer's face as he looked at Pruett.

"What's on your mind, Morgan?" Lew asked.

Morgan Pruett came up close and planted himself firmly in front of Sears. "Thought you were a pretty good lawyer, Lew, but you made a poor showing in there today."

Lew wet his lips. "I did the best I could."

"Like hell," Morgan snarled. "You let them railroad him."

Dallas felt tension flow across his shoulders. He reached the feed store next to the alley and stood on the walk, watching in silence. Morgan Pruett, his eyes pinned on Sears, wasn't aware of Dallas. The rancher said, "You damn two-bit—"

Lew saw the blow coming and tried to duck, but he wasn't fast enough. Morgan's fist landed with a sickening sound and Lew went back, his boots churning the dust. Pruett followed him and Pruett's fists were wicked things that ripped and slashed at the lawyer's face. Lew went down and Pruett went up close to him, aiming the toe of his boot at the lawyer's head.

The town was quiet and Dallas's voice cut through the silence like a knife. "That's enough, Morgan."

The rancher stiffened as though someone had jammed a gun in his back. His right foot was drawn back, ready to deliver the blow. He put it back on the ground and turned slowly to face Dallas. Pruett's face was dark with rage and the cords stood out in his neck.

Dallas spoke again. "You better cool off, Morgan."

A SOFT CURSE drew Dallas's eyes to Pruett's three man crew. They sat stiff in their saddles and stared at Dallas, three men whose calling was etched deep in their hard faces.

Dallas was looking at the one called Waco, the most dangerous of the lot. He saw Waco's hand edging toward his gun, saw the tight set of the gunman's face.

With his eyes still on Waco, Dallas spoke to Pruett. "Better tell that yahoo to settle down, Morgan, unless you're ready to try me out."

Waco said with a sneer, "I'm always ready."

Morgan Pruett stood there with indecision battling in his eyes. Dallas glanced at him and returned his gaze to Waco, knowing he was the man to watch. It was pretty big odds and Dallas wondered how many of them he could get before they stopped him.

Tock Hobart came drifting across the street and the foreman's voice was loud in the silence. "Better think it over, Morgan, unless you're ready to see somebody die."

"And that somebody could be you, Morgan," Biff Jason said. The Wagonwheel puncher had come up to stand behind Dallas.

Pruett wet his lips and a scowl began to twist his face. He said sullenly, "This ain't none of your business, Dallas."

"You're wrong," Dallas said. "Lew's a friend of mine."

"The dirty son sold me out," Morgan growled. "There wasn't any evidence, but he didn't even make a point of it."

Dallas smiled thinly. "We had the evidence, but it disappeared. Anyway, there wasn't much Lew could do. Kyle was guilty. You ought to feel good that he got off as light as he did."

"My boy's not a thief, Dallas. You're railroading him." Without waiting for an answer, the rancher strode to his horse and stepped up. He lifted the reins, then leveled a hard stare at Dallas.

"Kyle won't forget this," Pruett said in a low voice.

"I'll be around, Morgan," Dallas answered. "Any time he wants me."

"You may not be around as long as you think," Waco said.

And then they were gone, raising a cloud of dust as they pounded out of town. Dallas stared after them a moment, then went over and helped Lew Sears to his feet. The lawyer was still dazed, his face bloody and beginning to swell. His legs were wobbly and Dallas had to steady him.

"I'm sorry, Lew," Dallas said. "I guess I'm kinda to blame for this."

"It's all right," Lew said, rubbing his jaw.

"I'll pay the fee," Dallas told him, troubled by a sense of guilt. "You'll never get it out of Morgan."

"Forget it," Lew said. "What I need right now is a drink."

Dallas shook his head. "The first thing you need is to have your face tended to. Besides, you've been drinking too much lately."

Lew frowned at him. "It's my business if I want to drink."

"You're not going to get anywhere with Mickey trying to drink yourself to death," Dallas said.

Without looking at him, Lew said, "Mickey doesn't care anything about me—never has."

"I happen to know better," Dallas said. "You go on to the doc's office and I'll send Tock down to tell Mickey you been bunged up. The doc's not in, but his housekeeper can take care of you."

"It won't work," Lew said gloomily.

"It'll work," Dallas said. "And I'll tell you something else that'll work. You lay

off that whisky bottle and put your foot down with Mickey. You've always been too easy with her and she's not a gal you can handle that way."

Lew brightened a little. He turned and started toward the doc's office, his shoulders straighter than Dallas had seen them in a long time.

When he had gone a short distance, Lew turned and looked back, and tried to make his battered mouth smile. "Thanks, Race. Thanks a lot."

Tock Hobart and Biff Jason had stood by, looking on in silence. Dallas turned to Tock. "Run down and tell Mickey that Lew's in pretty bad shape."

"It's as good as done," Tock said, grinning. "Come on, Biff." The two men hurried down the street toward the Chase house.

DALLAS watched them a moment, then drifted over to the feed store and sat down on a bale of hay. He put a cigarette together, smoking and watching the street until Mo Welby, the owner of the place, finished waiting on a customer and came over.

"Something I can do for you, Race?"

"Just killing a little time, Mo," Dallas told him.

Welby picked up a piece of straw and began to chew on it, silent for a moment. Then he said, "I thought for a minute that you and Morgan was going to have at it over there a while ago."

Dallas shook his head. "Morgan was just worked up over Kyle."

"Mebbe so, Race, but better keep your eyes on that Waco."

"I figure to," Dallas said.

He caught sight of Mickey Chase then and he began to smile. The girl was hurrying down the street, Tock and Biff tagging along behind. The two Wagonwheel hands turned in at the saloon while Mickey came on toward the doc's office. She passed the feed store on the opposite side of the street, and she didn't glance in his direction, But Dallas could see the concern on her smooth face.

Dallas began to smile.

A glance along the street showed him that Arnie Pruett was coming from the direction of the livery stable, and from the expression on Arnie's face, Dallas knew the kid was in a bad mood.

Dallas got to his feet, eyes pinned on Arnie Pruett.

Arnie was coming down the center of the street, his hat missing and pieces of livery stable hay clinging to his hair. Dallas's fists had split Arnie's lips and they were puffed out of shape. His attempt to wipe the blood away had smeared it across his face. People stopped to stare at him and one of them said something, but Arnie did not answer and his eyes stayed on Dallas.

"I'm coming after you, Dallas," Arnie yelled when he was closer.

Mo Welby muttered something and be-

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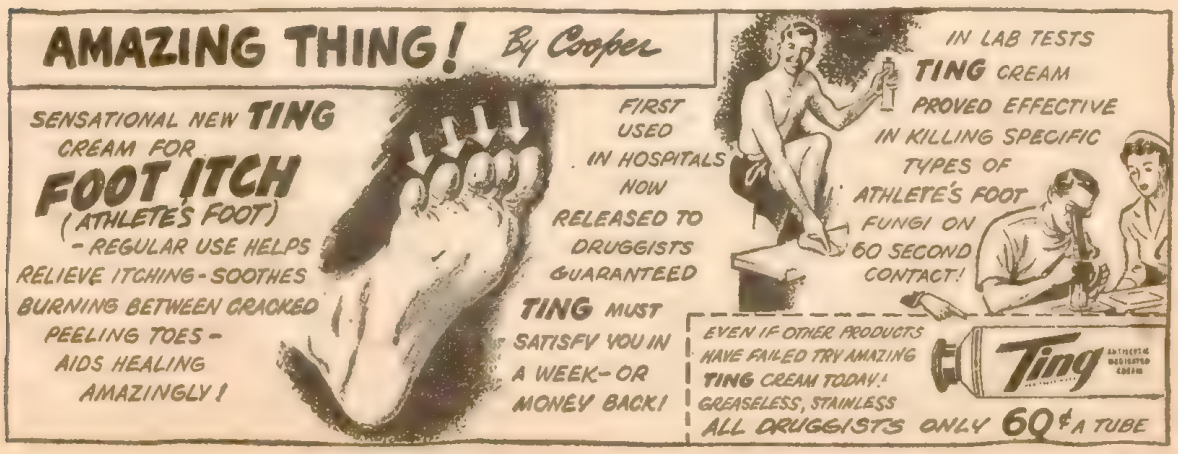
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gan backing toward the doorway. Dallas stepped off the porch, his insides tight as he moved toward young Pruett. When only ten feet separated them, Arnie stopped and his fingers were trembling above the butt of his gun.

"You hit me," Arnie said. "And you hadn't oughta done it."

"You asked for it, Arnie."

Arnie went on as if he hadn't heard. "Nobody lays a hand on me, not even my old man."

"A few trips to the woodshed might have helped you, Arnie."

Arnie's swollen lips barely moved. "I'm going to put a bullet in your guts, Dallas."

"Better think it over, kid."

Dallas knew that he was wasting words, that talk wasn't going to stop Arnie this time. He had come to, down there at the livery stable, and anger had started working on him, anger that had grown and become a killing rage that demanded to be satisfied.

Reading what was going on in the kid's mind, Dallas spoke again, "Don't do it, Arnie. Don't be a damned fool."

"I'll fix you," Arnie said between his teeth, and he made a grab for his gun.

NOW THERE was no time to leap forward and try to get the gun away from Arnie, so the only thing to do was put a shot in Arnie's arm. That wasn't playing it smart, Dallas knew, because Arnie was a kid who would never change. Put a bullet in the big middle of him and get it over with.

But Dallas didn't have the heart to do it. He pulled his gun, bringing it up fast as he always did, was watching Arnie all the while. The kid seemed to be having trouble getting his six-shooter loose from the holster, and then suddenly he quit trying. A bawl of pain broke out of him as Dallas's bullet tore through his wrist and Arnie began to move around in a circle, doing a crazy kind of jig.

Dallas stood there with the smoke twisting up around his face, hearing the steady stream of curses, seeing the slow drip of blood into the dust.

After a moment, Dallas said, "You better go down to the doc's office, before you bleed to death."

Arnie stared wildly at his wrist, whimpering, "Damn you."

Dallas's face was stern. "The next time, I'm not going to fool with you, Arnie."

"To hell with you," Arnie cried. "I could have got you, but my gun hung up."

Orma Baxter came angling across the street, a worried expression on his face. "Come on, Arnie," the sheriff said. "I'll go down to the doc's with you."

Arnie let the lawman lead him away. When they had gone a few feet, he stopped and looked over his shoulder. "I ain't forgetting this, Dallas."

"You better think it over," Dallas said, "and remember what I told you. Next time I'm not calling my shots."

Baxter said in a rough voice, "Come on, Arnie."

Dallas stared after them, his face sober for a moment. He hadn't seen Mickey Chase and Lew Sears come out of the doctor's office, but they were there on the walk now, watching him.

Dallas went over to them, smiling as though nothing had happened. He looked at Mickey and said, "If you're going to be home, I might drop around."

Mickey's face colored. "I'm going to be home, but I'm going to have company. Lew's coming over."

"Tonight, and every night," Lew said.

When Mickey seemed to have trouble meeting his gaze, Dallas winked at Lew. There was an awkward silence, and then Mickey said, "You see, Lew and I talked things over."

"We have a sort of understanding," Lew said, and now he winked at Dallas.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Dallas said, "and good luck to both of you."

He left them then and headed for O'Mally's place, feeling the need of a drink.

THE CREW was still in town when Dallas headed for the ranch. He traveled the main road, letting his horse take its time, and was near the cut-

off when he met Doc Millard, on his way back from the basin.

"Sent a little business to the office while you were gone, Doc," Dallas told him.

Millard sat heavily in his saddle, moonlight showing the tired lines in his face. "Anything serious?"

"Didn't amount to much," Dallas said, reaching for his tobacco sack. "Lew Sears had a cut face and Arnie Pruett's arm was busted."

The medico sighed. "I reckon Mary took care of them. She's been around so long that she makes a pretty good nurse."

Dallas shaped up his smoke, asking, "How was the Lowrie girl's father?"

"Not good, Race. I gave him some pills to take his fever down, but there's not much I can do for what's wrong with him."

"What do you mean, Doc?"

Millard leaned forward and folded his hands over the horn. "Have you ever seen how those folks over there live?"

"Just from a distance."

"Their crops have burned out and they haven't half enough to eat. The old man's down to skin and bones. I'll bet he hasn't had a piece of beefsteak in months."

The cigarette didn't taste right. Dallas pinched it out, a scowl building on his face. "You look at me like I was to blame for the fix they're in."

"You posted the sign at the top of the pass."

Temper began to prod Dallas. He said, "What the hell do you want me to do, tear the sign down and say here's my land, folks, move right in, plow up the graze and string your wire from one end of it to the other."

"They wouldn't take up much room."

"It's not just them that I'm worrying about, Doc. But if I let them in, it won't be no time till the whole valley will be swarming with plow-pushers. I know you feel sorry for them, Doc, and it's a sad story, but why didn't they stay back where they came from? I'll tell you why. They're a sniveling, shiftless lot."

Millard gave him a straight look and said, "You think the girl Catherine is like that?"

Dallas ignored the question and asked one of his own. "Did they pay you, Doc?"

"I told them to take their time about it."

"Send me the bill."

"I don't think the girl would like that, Race."

Dallas rode on without looking back, but he had a feeling Millard was staring after him. That sawbones was always getting under his hide. Now he was trying to blame him for the shape those farmers had gotten themselves in.

He swore softly and tried to forget Millard, but the medico's words kept coming back, things he had said tonight and things he had said in the past.

For the first time Dallas took a good look at himself and he didn't care much for what he saw. For a long time he had been running this valley according to the way he saw fit, telling folks what they could do and what they couldn't do.

He hadn't come right out and said so, but he had let Lew Sears know that he wanted Kyle Pruett to go to the pen. The lawyer hadn't put up much of a case and because of that he had come close to getting killed.

Dallas frowned now, wondering how many other such incidents had happened in the past, things he had been responsible for without realizing it. It had all started because his father was a gambler and folks had called him that tinhorn's kid. He had set out to prove that he could be somebody and he had gone too far.

Again Dallas swore, wishing he had stayed in town. It was Saturday night and there were folks to talk to and whisky to drink, and a poker game if a man was in the mood. But Dallas wasn't in the mood for any of it. He rode on toward the ranch and there was a heaviness inside him.

NEXT MORNING, Ben Haskall, one of the colonists, left early to go after water. Catherine went to the doorway when she heard the old rattletrap wagon pull up outside.

"It's Ben, Father," she said to the man lying on the homemade bed. "He's back with the water."

"I could stand a good cool drink," her father said.

Catherine crossed the room to get the water bucket. She looked down at Anson Lowrie, seeing his thin face and sunken cheeks, and something tightened inside her.

She felt his eyes on her and she tried to smile at him, but she was thinking that he looked old, old and burned out like the fields. Bitterness rose and became a hard lump that pressed against her throat. It seemed such a short time ago that her father had been young and handsome, a man with heavy black hair who laughed and sang while he worked.

Catherine went outside, her hand tight on the handle of the water bucket. Such a short time ago and now there were lines in his face and his hair was white and he didn't sing any more. He just lay there on the bed, staring into the past with bitter eyes.

Ben Haskall was standing in the back of the wagon, dipping water out of one of the barrels. He was a skinny, tired-looking man in patched overalls and a straw hat with half the brim missing. Several of the other women of the settlement were standing behind the wagon, and Catherine held back, waiting her turn.

Ben wiped sweat from his face and looked at Catherine. "How's Anson?"

"The doctor left something that took his fever down," Catherine told him.

Haskall leaned on one of the barrels, his eyes bitter. As if he were talking to himself, he said, "On my way back with the water, I come across a stray cow. I thought about my kids and I had a hard time passing it up."

"We're not thieves, Ben."

"But we're human beings, Catherine, and I'm getting where I can't stand to look my kids in the face."

"I know, Ben," she said miserably. "But we'll work it out some way."

Haskall didn't look very hopeful. "Anson's always said trust in the Lord and He'll take care of us, and that's what we've done. Me and my family get down on our knees every night, but it seems like the good Lord can't hear us."

"He hears you, Ben. Now you quit doubting and get the water in out of the sun."

WITHOUT looking at him again, she took the bucket of water and went back into the house. Anson lay staring at the ceiling, his hands folded across his chest; thin hands with blue veins standing out on their backs.

Again Catherine felt that twinge inside her as she carried him a tin cup of the water. She sat on the side of the bed and stroked his hand while he drank. When he lay back on the pillow, she smoothed his hair and smiled at him, trying to hide the discouragement that was like a weight in her.

"I feel better, Cathy," Anson said in a weak voice. "I think that medicine the doc left is helping."

"Sure," she said, "you'll be well before you know it."

He lay quietly and looked at her. "This is Sunday, isn't it, Cathy?"

She nodded and watched a distant expression creep into his eyes, and heard him say, "Remember how we used to go to church every Sunday?"

"I remember, Father."

"Never used to miss a Sunday, did we?" A soft smile touched his lips and he looked beyond her. "I remember how pretty your mother was when she got all dressed up in her go-to-meeting clothes. And sometimes we'd go on a picnic and you'd wade in the creek with that kid with the big ears. What was his name?"

"Andy Summers."

"I remember now. He had a crush on you and your mother and me used to josh you about him. And sometimes I'd pitch horseshoes and I remember how hard I'd try to win when I knew your mother was watching."

Catherine's throat was tight and hurting. She said gently, "You'd better try to sleep a while, Dad."

"I can't sleep, Cathy. All I can do is lie here and think about her and remember what used to be."

"Don't torture yourself that way, Dad."

"I can't help it, Cathy. It keeps eating into me like a sore. She wasn't in favor of coming here, tried to make me see we weren't doing bad where we were. But I listened to the crook that sold us this land, let his talk go to my head. I dragged your mother away and the trip out here was too much for her. I the same as killed her, Cathy."

"Don't say that, Dad," Catherine cried. "Don't ever say that again. You did what you thought was best for all of us. Maybe it was a mistake, but she didn't blame you for it. She loved you. Now quit worrying about anything and try to get some rest."

"All right, Cathy. I'll try to rest." He looked at her and swallowed hard. "I'm going to get well and then we'll move on and leave this place. Somewhere we'll find land with water on it and we'll start over."

"Sure we will, Dad." She kissed him and walked out of the house, moving blindly across the sun-baked yard with his words echoing in her mind. "We'll start over again."

But it took money to start with, and money was something they didn't have. A good crop would save them, but the crops were dying for want of water. She passed the Haskall place and saw Ben sitting in the doorway, a forlorn figure as he watched his three children playing in the yard.

Catherine climbed to the top of the pass, stopping several times to rest on the way. She looked at the keep-out sign and her lips tightened into a thin line of bitterness. The desire to tear it down seized her, but she realized it would be wasted effort.

She stood beside the boulder where she had been standing the day she met Dallas, and she thought of Dallas as she looked out across the green vastness of the valley, his valley, he had said, and the sight of it lifted her spirits. To leave the sun-hammered desolation of the basin and come here was like a tonic.

The roar of the creek was in her ears and she walked down to the bank and drank of the clear cool water. She could see her reflection in the water and, staring at it, she wondered how she had looked to Dallas.

This thought angered her and she got to her feet. Dallas was the kind of man who had no time for women, time for nothing except his land and his cattle. He was hard and selfish and she didn't understand why she was unable to forget him.

"The meek shall inherit the earth."

It said that in the hide-bound Bible her father read every night and now for the first time Catherine had her doubts. There was water here, water that would bring their crops to life and turn the basin green like the valley.

The creek twisted down into the valley. She stood there watching the water leap over the rocks, flowing swiftly, like a winding band of silver in the sunlight. A sense of injustice filled her and the sound of the stream seemed to mock her.

Water so close and yet so far away. Or was it? A sudden excitement took hold of her and she ran up the bank and looked at the rocky gulch that wound down into the basin. It would be a fairly simple matter to dam the creek and channel the water into the gulch.

There was only one thing to keep it from working. Dallas. He would claim he needed the water for his cattle and he would not let them build the dam.

Dallas had tough men working for him, men who knew how to handle a gun. What chance would a handful of farmers have aaginst them? The only way to stop Dallas was to hire men like him, tough men who knew how to fight. Catherine turned and walked slowly back toward the basin, wondering where she could find such men.

MONDAY MORNING, Dallas rode out alone and headed toward the mountains, making certain none of his crew were in sight when he choused a stray steer out of the timber. The big dun-colored longhorn ran a ways and then tried to cut back into the brush, but Dallas's buckskin, anticipating the move, headed him off, and they got lined out toward the pass.

All day Sunday Dallas had been restless and irritable, unable to close his ears to Doc Millard's words. And now, going over

the pass with the steer trotting along ahead of him, a wry grin creased his face and he wondered what Doc would say if he could see him delivering Wagonwheel beef to the farmers.

He dropped down into the basin and saw again the settlement, the burned-out fields and the sod houses, looking drab in the harsh glare of the sun. A barren land without shade trees that made him sharply conscious of the difference between this land and the valley just over the pass.

He hazed the steer across the dry creek bed and now there was an odd feeling inside him and he was not at ease.

Three children were playing in front of one of the huts. They stared at Dallas from round eyes a moment before turning to dart through the doorway. Dallas pushed his hat back and wet his lips, wondering which one of the houses Catherine lived in.

His eyes moved over the cracked yards and settled on the end house as Catherine appeared in the doorway, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She stepped into the yard and he was aware of the stiffness in her as she looked at him.

"How's your father?" he asked.

"Better," she answered in a cool voice.

Saddle leather squeaked as Dallas shifted his weight. He saw the girl turn her head, saw her puzzled frown when she noticed the steer.

"I thought you might like some beef," he said.

Her head came up and her shoulders went back a little more. "We can get along without it."

"Folks need beefsteak," Dallas said, reaching for his tobacco sack.

"We have no money to pay for it."

He shook tobacco into a wheatstraw paper, saying, "I wasn't figuring on charging you for it."

Catherine said through tight lips, "We don't want charity."

Dallas stared at her, a sense of frustration taking hold of him. He said, "Then you can pay me for it later."

"We'll wait until we can pay cash."

"You're pretty stubborn, ma'am." He finally got the smoke going.

Catherine stared at him unflinchingly. "Are you the only one who has a right to be stubborn?"

Dallas felt his neck getting warm and he did not look at her directly. He said, "I was just trying to be neighborly."

"Is that it, Mr. Dallas, or it your conscience beginning to bother you?"

He looked at her then, and he was scowling. "I didn't come here to argue with you."

"Then take your cow and go back to your valley."

"Steer—not cow," he said, trying to hold his temper down.

"Whatever it is, take it back with you."

ANGER broke loose in Dallas then. He whirled his horse with a hard jerk of the reins. The steer, searching for graze along the creek bank, lifted its head to look around, and Dallas, without a backward glance, crossed the creek and headed for the pass.

He was in a sour mood as he climbed the pass. He should have known better than to come here in the first place. He had tried to do a good turn and help them out. He swore softly, telling himself that folks who got themselves in a fix like those farmers didn't have any right to be proud.

By the time he was over the pass his anger had receded and he began to justify Catherine's behavior. He even felt a touch of admiration for the way she had talked to him. A crooked grin caught at his mouth as he remembered the way she had stood there, stiff and straight with the sun shining on her hair. The girl was still in his mind when he heard the clatter of hoofs coming from the direction of town.

A dust cloud rolled toward the pass and materialized presently into a stagecoach. Dallas pulled to the edge of the trail and watched the big Concord rocking toward him. The driver pulled the six-horse team in at the foot of the grade and lifted his hand to Dallas, who gave him a nod in return.

Orma Baxter's face appeared at the rear side window. The sheriff said, "Howdy, Race."

Dallas moved his horse up close and looked inside the coach, noting that Baxter and Kyle Pruett were the only two passengers. Kyle sat facing the lawman, his hands folded in his lap. Dallas caught the glint of the handcuffs, saw the sullen cast of Kyle's face.

With his eyes settled on Baxter, Dallas said, "You don't look like you feel so good."

"I was up half the night," Baxter growled. "Damned belly kicking up on me again."

The driver spoke from the box. "In the mood he's in, I can see where I'm going to have nothing but trouble all the way to Canon City."

Baxter rubbed his stomach. "Them pills the doc gives me don't help any. Anyway, I reckon I'll live awhile yet. You see that the lid stays on while I'm gone, Race."

"Sure," Kyle Pruett said sulkily. "God'll see that everything is run right."

Dallas leaned forward in the saddle and looked at Kyle Pruett steadily. "You got what was coming to you, Kyle. Why don't you make the best of it?"

"To hell with you, Dallas."

"Maybe I should have let them throw the book at you."

Kyle's mouth was thin and twisted. "If you think locking me in stony lonesome is gonna change the way I feel about you, you're crazy."

Baxter sighed and shook his head. "You see, Race? I told you you weren't going to teach Kyle nothing."

Pruett glared at the sheriff. "We going to set here gabbing all day?"

"Reckon we better be rolling," Baxter called to the driver. "See you when I get back, Race."

Dallas stared after the Concord for a moment as it began the climb over the pass. Then he reined his horse around and headed toward home.

HE HAD dinner and was just stepping out of the cookshack when the swift pound of hoofs brought him up short. A stagecoach was racing toward him, the driver standing in the box, popping his whip and yelling at the team.

The big Concord swept into the yard, dust boiling up around it as the driver brought the team to a halt. Dallas ran over as Orma Baxter climbed out, cursing and rubbing the lump on his head.

"Round up some of your boys, Race, and have somebody saddle me a horse."

Dallas stared at him, frowning. "What happened?"

The sheriff swore again. "I didn't figure Kyle would try anything, so I was dozing a little going over the pass."

"And he jumped you, huh?"

"Yeah, grabbed my gun and hit me over the head with it before I knew what was going on. He found the key and unlocked the cuffs and made Pete stop long enough to let him off. Come on, let's get started after him."

"Let him go," Dallas said. "Maybe he'll quit the country."

Baxter felt the lump on his head again. "You don't know your men like I do, Race. Kyle hates your guts and he ain't going to stop till he's had a try at getting even."

"He can't get far without a horse, Orma. Let's go."

The sheriff had a drink out of the cook's bottle while Biff Jason saddled a horse for him. The stagecoach driver had one too, grumbling about his schedule being all shot to hell. Nobody paid much attention to the ribbon-popper.

Tock Hobart ordered some of the crew to saddle up, and ten minutes later they were lined out toward the pass. When they reached the top, Baxter reined in and Dallas stopped beside him, looking down at the cluster of huts.

"Reckon he'd head for there to try to get a horse," Baxter said. "Let's find out."

Catherine Lowrie was standing in the doorway, shaking a rag rug, when they rode up to the Lowrie house. The girl put the rug down and came into the yard, laid a cool glance on Dallas, and looked inquiringly at the sheriff.

"We're looking for an escaped prisoner, ma'am," the sheriff explained.

Dallas looked around for the steer, but he didn't spot it. He wondered if they had

butchered it or thrown it back onto his range. He heard the girl saying, "No one has stopped here."

"Figured he'd try to get a horse," Baxter said.

"The horses we have wouldn't take him far," Catherine answered.

Her eyes returned briefly to Dallas and he felt suddenly uncomfortable.

Baxter scanned the mountain slope, frowning. "He ain't going to get far afoot and it's a long ways to any place else where he can get a horse."

Catherine looked up at the lawman, asking, "What is the man wanted for?"

"Cattle rustling," Baxter told her.

"Mr. Dallas's cattle, no doubt."

"That's right." Baxter glanced at Dallas, then back to the girl. "His name's Kyle Pruett, ma'am, and he can be pretty ornery if he wants to."

The lawman gave her Pruett's description, ending with, "You be on the lookout, ma'am. He may wait till dark, then come down and try to steal a horse."

The girl nodded and stepped back as Baxter lifted the reins. Dallas waited for her to look at him again, and when she didn't, he spoke to his horse and followed the others out of the yard.

They spent the rest of the afternoon combing the mountains and by sundown they still hadn't picked up Kyle's trail. Dallas called a halt. "Me and the boys have something else to do besides chase around out here after Pruett, Orma. We're hitting for home."

"We'll miss the grub call if we don't get there pretty soon," Tock Hobart said.

The sheriff cast a worried glance into the timber. "I don't see where he could have gone to."

"Lots of places he could be holing up," Dallas said. "Anyway, we've wasted too much time already."

Baxter tried to find a more comfortable position in the saddle. He said, "If I was you, Race, I'd want to find Kyle before he had a chance to pot me from the brush."

"I've been shot at before, Orma."

"Yeah, I know, Race. You've been pretty lucky, but a man's luck has a habit of changing. Kyle's on the loose and he's out to get you."

"He knows where to find me," Dallas said.

Baxter glanced at his watch. "I'll get on back to town. After supper, I'll ride out to Rafter P and see if Kyle shows up there."

"You better get some sleep," Dallas said. "You look like you could use ten hours."

"I haven't got any time to sleep."

Dallas made an impatient gesture. "Kyle Pruett ain't important enough to lose shuteye over. Come on, boys. Let's go."

DURING the following week, Dallas kept busy and found little time to think about Kyle Pruett. The sheriff rode by several times with word that Kyle still hadn't been seen anywhere. Friday, when Dallas rode in off the range, he found Baxter down at the cookshack eating a piece of cherry cobbler.

"That's likely what's wrong with your belly," Dallas said.

Baxter spoke around a mouthful of cobbler. "If a man can't eat what he likes, he might just as well shoot himself."

Dallas poured himself a cup of coffee and lingered at the stove to lift a lid on one of the pots. When he caught Biscuit Jones scowling at him, he put the lid back on and took his coffee over to the table.

"I haven't been in to town all week, Orma. What's new?"

The sheriff pushed the empty dish back and wiped the corners of his mouth. "The big news is that Lew and Mickey have set the date."

"You're joshing me."

"Nope, Mickey told me herself. Said Lew was figuring on you being best man."

"I'm mighty glad to hear they're getting hitched," Dallas said. "Mickey'll settle down now and behave herself."

"There never was nothing wrong with her," Baxter said, "that a man couldn't cure. But I always had a hunch you'd be the man."

Dallas took a sip of his coffee. "Never was nothing serious between Mickey and me, Orma."

The sheriff pushed his chair back. "It's time you was getting serious about some girl, Race. Seems like everybody's getting married but you."

"I'm the only one that's got any sense," Dallas said with a grin.

Baxter walked to the door and looked back, frowning. "Still no sign of Kyle."

"Stop worrying. Kyle's probably in Mexico by now."

"I wish I could be sure of that."

Baxter left and a little later Dallas was walking toward the house when he saw a rider coming toward him. It was Tex and the puncher was pushing his horse hard. A man didn't ride that way unless there was need for it, so Dallas stopped.

A moment later Tex swept into the yard, his face worried.

"What's up, Tex?"

"Trouble, boss. Them damned farmers have built a dam across Rabbit Creek and there ain't nothing left but a trickle."

The words stunned Dallas and all he could do was stare at Tex for a moment. Then he said grimly, "We'll see about that."

"You want me to round the boys up?"

"Not now, Tex. I'll ride over and have a talk with them folks."

HE RODE out and when he came to Rabbit Creek his face tightened. Who the hell did they think they were damming a creek that furnished water for his stock? That was a bunch of farmers for you. They didn't give a damn about anybody's rights.

He followed the creek into the mountains, climbing steadily through the silver spruce and blackjack pines. At last he broke into a clearing and reined up, staring stonily at the log and rock barrier across the stream.

Several men were still working on the dam with picks and shovels. Dallas, swearing softly, rode toward them. One of the men turned, saw him and said something to the others. All of them stopped working and began to look uneasy.

"Whose doings is this?" Dallas demanded.

The men exchanged glances, none of them answering. Dallas looked beyond them and saw a team dragging a log toward the creek. Catherine was handling the lines and when she saw Dallas, she stopped the horses and moved across the dam, her shoulders back and her head high.

There was anger in Dallas now and he was not aware of her beauty. He said, "You went to a lot of work for nothing."

"You're wrong," Catherine answered.

"I need this water for my cattle."

"There are other creeks on your range."

"Too far to the next creek."

Catherine said in a firm tone, "But you can make out, and we need this water for our crops."

Dallas's face was hard, unyielding. "The dam will have to come down."

"No." Catherine stared at him.

Inexorably, Dallas said, "My boys and I will be back later with some dynamite. Have your men out of here unless you want to see some of them hurt."

He saw the straight, obstinate set of her mouth and then he whirled his horse and started down the mountain. Before he had gone a dozen yards something slammed into his left shoulder and drove him forward onto the horse's neck.

He felt the quick sharp bite of pain, heard the flat sound of the rifle. Darkness rushed in, but he fought it off. Digging in the spurs, he sent his mount racing through the timber.

IT WAS a rough ride back to the ranch and Dallas had a hard time staying in the saddle. Blood ran down his arm and each step of the horse sent sharp pain lancing through him.

At last he reached Wagonwheel headquarters and the buildings swam before his eyes. Fuzzy shapes were running across the yard, the pound of their boots and the sound of their voices a distant murmur.

The horse had come to a stop and Dallas sat there wobbling, his head sagging while the pain continued to hammer at him. His hands slipped from the horn and he felt himself falling, tried to get his boots out of the stirrups. The shadowy figures were all around him now. He felt their hands on

him, supporting him, carrying him inside.

Somebody gave him a drink of whisky and he gagged on it before getting it down. His head cleared a little. He looked up to see Tock Hobart standing over him, a whisky bottle in his hand. Dallas tried to focus his gaze on the foreman's face.

"Don't stand there like a damned fool."

"What happened, boss?"

Dallas winced as a fresh wave of pain struck him. "One of them farmers cut down on me, Tock. Get busy and dig the slug out."

"We better send for the doc, boss."

"To hell with waiting around for him. Give me another slug of that likker and start digging."

Biff Jason's face was tight with strain. He said, "You want us to ride over there and blast them farmers clean off there?"

"We'll all go, Biff, as soon as Tock gets me patched up."

Hobart was removing Dallas's shirt. Without looking up he said, "You ain't in no shape to ride back over there."

Dallas said through tight lips, "I'm going, Tock, so you better do a good job. Biff, we've still got some of that dynamite left. Put every damn stick in your saddlebags and saddle me a fresh horse."

Hobert got busy on the wound, using a knife that had been heated over the lamp wick. Sweat broke out on Dallas and his jaws ached from clamping his teeth together.

The knife bit deeper and then Hobart stepped back and threw the piece of lead on the table. When antiseptic had been applied to the wound, somebody stuck a cigarette between Dallas's lips and he smoked while Hobart bound him up.

Dallas had on a clean shirt and was ready to go out when the swift drum of hoofs drew his attention. A fast-running horse rounded into the yard and a moment later Catherine Lowrie entered the house, her eyes wide with dread.

"You come to have another try?" Dallas asked bitterly.

Wind had whipped the girl's hair into wild disarray. She came toward him and all the resentment was gone from her now. "It wasn't one of my people shot you."

"Who then?"

"Arnie Pruett."

"What's Arnie doing up there?"

"I'm responsible for it," Catherine said. "I was desperate and bitter. I hid Kyle Pruett when he escaped, listened to him when he said you were trying to frame him. When I told him about building the dam, he said he would help me, that he knew some other men who would help, too."

The girl paused a moment and Dallas sat quietly and looked at her, waiting.

"I was a fool," Catherine went on, "or I would have known that he just wanted a chance to hit at you. He brought his brother and some other men up there. They were hiding in the brush when you came. Arnie couldn't hold himself when you turned your back."

"They're there now?" Dallas asked.

Catherine nodded. Her face was pale and her eyes were shadowed with worry.

She said miserably, "I didn't stop to think that someone might be hurt. I told them to get out, but they just laughed at me, so I slipped away and came here to let you know they're waiting for you."

"They won't have long to wait," Dallas said. "Let's go, Tock."

THE SUN was low when they reached the mountains, a crimson flush that stained the rocky bed of Rabbit Creek. They followed the stream up through the timber, Dallas and four of his crew with Catherine bringing up the rear. They were men who were ready for battle.

Dallas stopped his horse and sat watching a man ride down the mountain slope toward them. It was Morgan Pruett.

When he was close, Morgan reined up and without looking at any of them, said in a dull voice, "They're up there waiting for you, Dallas, Arnie and Kyle and Waco and the rest of my crew."

The arrogance was gone from Morgan Pruett now and he looked old and tired. Dallas studied him and said, "I'm sorry."

"I tried to talk to them," Morgan said, still staring into space. "I tried to stop them when Kyle came to the house after

them. I've been a stubborn damned fool, trying to tell myself the boys weren't really bad. But they've gone too far this time and I'm through helping them."

He rode on down the slope, a vacant expression on his face, a dejected slump to his shoulders. Dallas stared after him a moment, then lifted his reins. "Let's go."

They rode on and Catherine came behind them. Twice Dallas tried to get her to stay back, but the girl refused and Dallas tried to put her from his mind, concentrating on the business at hand. The clearing was before them, red with the light of a fading sun, and then a gun broke loose. Dallas and his men quit leather, slapping their mounts on the rumps to get them out of the way.

There was a moment of silence following that first burst of shots, and Kyle Pruett called out, "Damn you, Arnie. If you'd waited till they got in the open, we could've cut them down."

But Arnie had been too anxious to get in a shot at Dallas and now the Wagon-wheel riders were down in the brush at the edge of the clearing, and it was plain that Kyle didn't like that.

He stood up and yelled at the others who had the clearing half surrounded. "Let's take 'em."

NOW THEY came across the clearing, Kyle, Arnie, Waco and two others, hard men, the kind who didn't need much excuse to kill. They came with their six-shooters pounding and Dallas and his crew went to meet them. The roar of the guns swelled and became a vengeful thunder that rolled across the mountain.

Biff Jason went down with a bullet in his leg, then lifted his gun and sent a bullet into Waco's chest. The slender gunman spun around and took half a dozen steps back the way he had come, then dropped down with his face pressed in the dirt.

Arnie Pruett came running across the clearing, firing wildly in his haste to get Dallas. The kid had a bandage on his hand, but that didn't stop him from holding a gun.

Dallas shoved fresh loads into his weapon and watched Arnie come toward him. One of Arnie's bullets plucked at Dallas's shirt and then Arnie Pruett was going down with lead in his throat.

Kyle Pruett was cursing as he stepped over Waco's lifeless body, cursing his companions who had lost heart and were backing toward the timber. Tock Hobart turned his gun in Kyle's direction and squeezed off a quick shot that took Kyle high in the right arm, and Kyle fell.

Dallas looked down at him. "You'll get more than a year this time."

Kyle was watching the blood ooze between his fingers. He didn't answer.

Dallas glanced up in time to see Catherine Lowrie ride out of the timber and across the dam. The girl was slumped in the saddle and she did not look at him. He left Hobart to look after Kyle, and told another puncher to get busy with the dynamite they had brought along. Then he got his horse and rode after Catherine.

The girl had reached the pass and was starting toward the basin when he caught up with her.

"I'm blowing up the dam," he said.

"I know," she answered, not looking at him.

Dallas's shoulder was throbbing, but there wasn't much pain. He said, "I'm also taking down the keep-out sign. You'll like it better in the valley."

She looked at him then and her eyes were misty.

"You really mean it?"

He grinned at her. "I told you I like spuds with my beefsteak. We've got plenty of beef, but we're running low on potatoes."

She smiled then, the first time Dallas had seen her smile, and he rode close to her. They needed no words, these two. They both knew what had happened to them.

Suddenly, in mutual understanding, they reined in their horses. He leaned over, put his arms around her as he had so often longed to do. All the fights and troubles were forgotten in their kiss. The sun was gone, but to Dallas it was still shining—just for them.

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

THE TROUBLE

JEANIE JONES kicked the oven door shut with a crash that seemed to shake the big, shiny Box J kitchen. Then she winced and bit her lip. She hadn't meant to slam things, but she was all upset today and everything was haywire. The berry pie she'd been taking from the oven had gotten away from her somehow and was splattered all over the floor.

She pushed back her gold-blond hair and reflected that the Jones family jinx, which had settled upon her because she was the only member of the tribe left, was going strong.

Or maybe it hadn't been the jinx at all. Maybe if she'd been thinking more about what she was doing and less about the silly way she'd flared up at Hugh Dalton just when he had romantic notions—

A voice said, "Hi, Trouble! Drop something?"

It was Donna Cline, looking cool and lovely in her riding outfit. Donna had dark hair and a figure that made hombres take long looks.

She was twenty, a year older than Jeanie, and she let Jeanie live here on the ranch that would still have had Jones on the mailbox if Jeanie's father hadn't banked too heavy on the worth of three queens in a poker game.

"You bet I dropped something," Jeanie said bitterly. "Just look at that pie! Now I'll have to clean it up—" She looked at Donna again. "How'd you make out in town?"

Donna slapped her quirt against a polished boot. "That old judge was a cinch. I bamboozled him into not appointing a guardian for me for a while yet. Thirty days. You should have seen Al Kinnard's hatchet face drop when I told him about it."

Donna stepped around the ruins of the pie and took a cookie from a jar and nibbled thoughtfully.

Jeanie rubbed her hands on her levis. Donna was pretty spoiled and when she got that look in her eyes she had some willful notion or other.

Her uncle, who had won the Box J in that poker game, had died a couple months back. Kinnard, the upstart lawyer down in Gunpowder, had been angling to get himself appointed Donna's guardian. Donna had it figured that the law-shark was after the ranch, and likely she was right. A lawyer could pull a lot of strings.

Jeanie said, "Thirty days isn't long. What are you going to do?"

"Get married. I was thinking about it on the way from town. It's time I was hitched anyhow. All the girls my age have got husbands, and what I need is some nice hombre over twenty-one who'll do as I tell 'im. I picked 'em over and decided on that big, easygoing, handsome Hugh Dalton."

"Hugh!" Jeanie gasped. "Why, I—I mean, I don't think he—"

Donna helped herself to another cookie. "You mean you don't think he's in love with me. Piffle. He will be."

"But gosh, it seems kind of calculating. I mean—"

Donna laughed merrily. "Oh, you've got rainbows in your head. A girl's got to be practical about things. This'll throw a spoke in Al Kinnard's scheme for sure. And Hugh's got a good job and he certainly hasn't acted like he's after my money. A girl like me has to watch out for fortune hunters."

Jeanie said, "Tough," under her breath. When Donna had sailed out of the kitchen she said, "Just like that. Darn!"

WITH JEANIE

SHE HAD A

HOPELESS CRUSH

on her

dream man . . .

a gorgeous

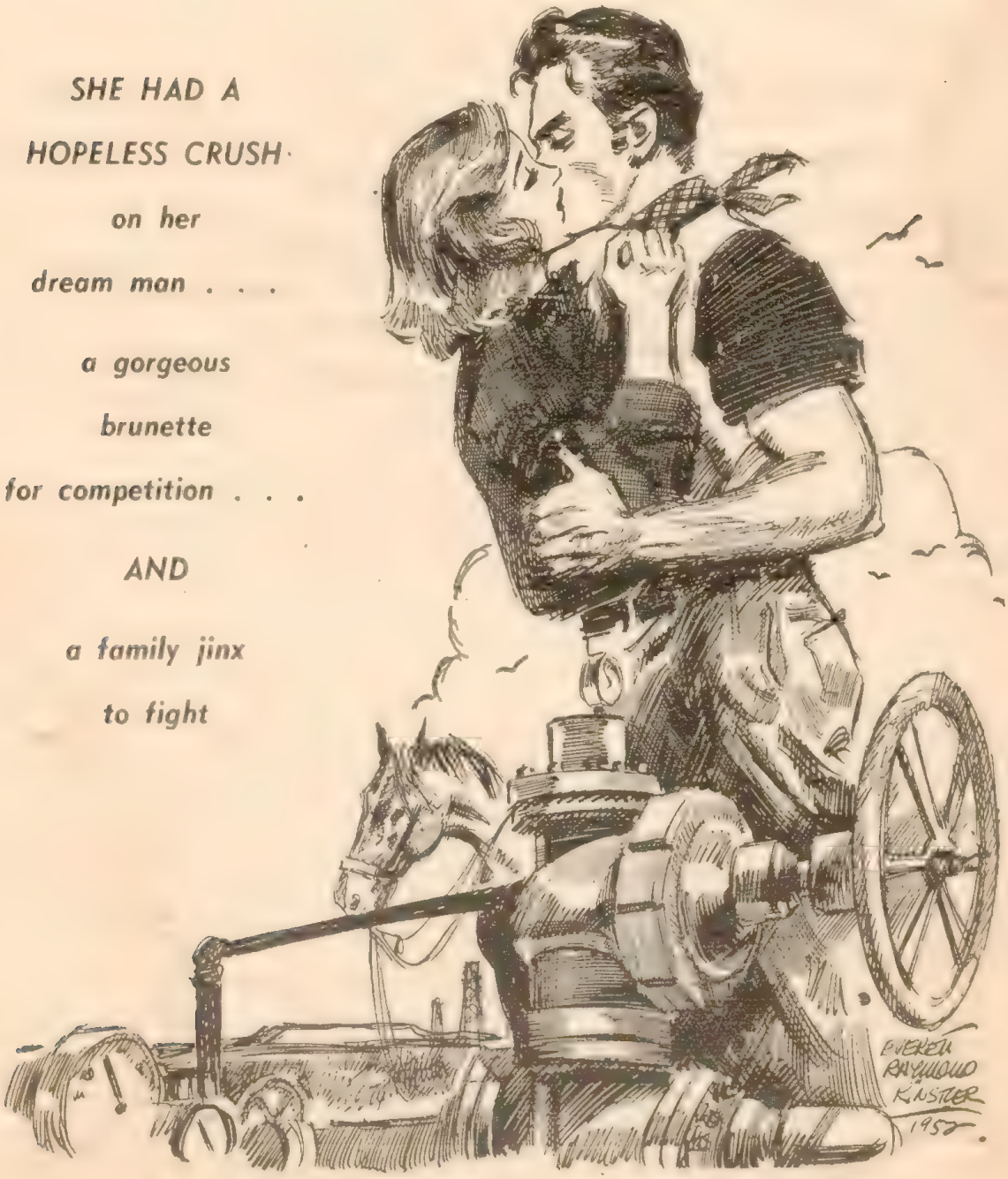
brunette

for competition . . .

AND

a family jinx

to fight



She went into his arms, not stumbling over a thing now

THE JINX seemed to be rolling right along. Hugh Dalton was a husky hombre of twenty-four, a mining engineer who'd breezed into the Gunpowder country and wangled himself a job with old Judge Osgood, who owned mining properties here and there.

Hugh had a truck and some gadgets and he called himself an up-to-date prospector, whatever that was. He'd been out to the Box J a few times. Lately he'd taken to meeting Jeanie on her grocery-buying trips to town.

Yesterday he'd turned suddenly solemn and put his arms around her. The moment had a breathless magic in it, but then her horse, Nip, spooked up at something and she'd had to go grab the reins.

Hugh'd given her a flustered grin and made some remark about horsebacking being an old-fashioned way of getting from place to place. Jeanie, who loved horses, fired back the retort that miners shouldn't talk, that mining was just gambling done the hard way. She'd actually yelled at him, and he'd seemed to enjoy it, which made her so mad she jumped on her horse and got out of there.

She didn't know what on earth had ailed her. Oh, she had reason to feel keenly about the mining business. Her father's old Lucky Ledge, on the other side of the Gunpowder Hills, had paid for this big ranch and all the cattle that now were Donna Cline's. Then bang, the vein played out. And when her father, having gambled the ranch away, went back into the mine to look for more gold, he had been killed by a fall of rock.

The judge hadn't bothered to appoint a guardian for Jeanie. Everybody knew the mine wasn't worth shucks any more.

She dipped water from the stove reservoir and cleaned the floor. She'd meant that pie as sort of a peace offering. Maybe, if Hugh dropped by, it would show him how sorry she was that she'd blown her top. Maybe living here on somebody else's charity had made her overly touchy.

And now it was costing her plenty. Now that Donna was after the hombre Jeanie knew that she loved him, miner or not.

She was just finishing the cleaning when high heels tapped on the patio tiles and Donna came in and did a little pirouette.

Donna had put on a summery dress that had cost plenty and looked it, though the crafty dressmaker had saved some on material toward the top. The silk hugged Donna's pert figure like it was afraid it wouldn't get another chance, accenting the proud way she held her shoulders and the lithe slimness of her waist, then exploding into a billowy skirt.

"Here goes," Donna said. "I've got old Pedro hitching up the surrey and I'm bound for town."

"Hugh's not in town," Jeanie pointed out. "He's in the hills somewhere."

"He'll show up at the hotel. He lives there—and I'll just happen to be there when he walks in. He doesn't know it yet, but he's taking me to the dance tonight. Wish me luck?"

"You won't be needing it," Jeanie said, with a meaningful glance at Donna's gown.

Donna laughed, got another cookie and departed.

When Jeanie heard the surrey drive away she ran to her room and peered at her reflection in the mirror. What she saw was a wholesome-type girl, slim but feminine even in shirt and levis. Her face had a tomboy tan. Her eyes were big, brown and somber. Not at all the dazzler type, like Donna.

And men were like trout, darn 'em, rising for the flashiest bait. Hugh wouldn't be any exception. He was a man, wasn't he? Donna's having a big ranch wouldn't really bother him, either. He was human.

Jeanie clenched her small tanned fists. She changed into one of Donna's old dresses that she had cut down to fit her. She brushed her hair until it was as glossy as the gold that wasn't in the Lucky Ledge any more, and put some color on her cheeks to get away from that dratted tomboy look.

The results were middlin' good. She didn't have any ranch to dangle for bait, but she looked slightly wicked and she aimed to have a try at breaking up Donna's cold-blooded, spoiled-brat game.

She was grateful to Donna, but gratitude went just so far and stopped in its tracks

when you saw the man you loved getting plucked like a number out of a hat.

Donna had claimed Jeanie had rainbows in her head. Well, she'd prove that she could be practical too.

WHEN SHE reached Gunpowder, driving the Box J buckboard, it was evening. Old Sam Remson was sitting with his chair tilted back against the door of his livery stable. When she passed him the chair's front legs banged down and his old blue eyes opened wide.

She went to the store, which hadn't closed yet, and killed time looking at saddles. When she saw Hugh and Donna stroll along the walk toward the hall where the dances were held, she went out there and got in the way.

There were a lot of people going back and forth, but Jeanie was aware only of Hugh. He was all slicked up in a town suit that made his shoulders seem broader than ever. He looked startled when he saw Jeanie, but he smiled at her and his humorous brown eyes held that worshipful glint that always made her heart jump. Donna clung to his arm and glared at Jeanie with suspicion.

"Just happened to be here," Jeanie said. "Say, it sounds like they're tuning up for a dance!"

"Suspected that," Hugh drawled, crooking his other arm for Jeanie. "Any cowboy law against a man taking two pretty gals?"

They moved along the walk, with Jeanie on the outside. But something happened. It always did, with Jeanie. At a place where the walk crossed a little gully her foot slipped off the plank.

It happened so quickly that she lost her grip on Hugh's arm and down she went, in a heap. The trouble was that in doing so she bumped against a big hombre dressed in rough miner's clothing, who had stepped from the walk to let them pass.

The hombre swayed and blinked at her, saying, "Why'n'cha look where you're going, sister? If you percentage gals'd stay in the saloon—"

Hugh jumped down and helped Jeanie to her feet and asked if she was hurt. Biting her lip against the twinge of the ankle she'd turned she lied, "No. Hugh—Hugh, please!"

But he was looking at the drunken miner. He stalked over there with his jaw thrust out, and all of a sudden they were fighting. The miner went down. But he had friends, two of them. One with a scarred face came up and sailed into Hugh.

Donna screamed. The town marshal came from the hall, shouting and brandishing his gun. "The lot of you are under arrest. Charges of disturbing the peace, fighting and assault. I got a jail that'll cool you down."

Both Jeanie and Donna protested that Hugh had been in the right. But the marshal said it made no difference.

"Fighting, wasn't he? That's agin the law. Move along, you hombres."

When they were gone, Donna said, "You did that on purpose!"

"I did not!" Jeanie flared. And that was the truth. As she limped to the buckboard she reflected bitterly that the Jones jinx was still busy.

BOTH GIRLS were in court on the following morning, Donna in her riding outfit of whipcord breeches and silk blouse, Jeanie in shirt and levis.

Judge Osgood was a prim little wizened hombre with a high collar. He'd retired from the mining business and he was out to make Gunpowder a respectable place. He said so, loud and often.

"Court finds each and all of you guilty as charged," he said now. "Sentence is ten days in jail, suspended if you get out of our town. Beachey, you will apologize to the young lady there." He aimed his gavel toward Jeanie.

The big hombre turned. "I wasn't seeing straight," he said. "That dress you had on made you look like a—aw, I'm sorry."

Hugh Dalton said, "Judge, I've got work here. I can't—"

The gavel aimed at Hugh. "You heard the judgment of this court." The gavel banged. "Court's adjourned. Now, young feller, as your employer I got a word to

say. You been prospecting for me with them new-fangled gadgets for weeks and you ain't turned up a thing. On top of which you've panned out to be the kind of ruffian that gives our town a bad reputation. You're fired."

Jeanie looked at Donna in swift, stricken comprehension. Donna had held up the opening of court for an hour, while she talked to the judge in his chambers.

Jeanie had thought she was trying to help. But now she had a hunch that the palaver had taken another direction altogether. Donna had gotten Hugh fired. The way she was smiling now proved it. But why would anybody do a thing like that?

The girls had quite a row when they got back to the Box J. Jeanie was throwing her stuff into a sack, and Donna was leaning against the door jamb, her arms folded and her dark eyes smoldering.

Jeanie said, "Of all the dirty, lowdown tricks!"

Donna knew what she meant. She said, "He needs a little nudge. I found out that he owes money at the bank on his prospecting outfit, and he's too broke to buy a ticket out of town. Now maybe he'll—"

"But I thought he got a lot of money for making all those little fool holes in the ground," Jeanie cried.

"It was a contract job, to be paid for when finished. The judge was easy. He's so whooped up about making Gunpowder respectable that all I had to do was make out Hugh was a menace to have around. So what can Hugh do—sue the judge? Ha! A nice big ranch, with little Donna to go with it, ought to look good to him now."

"And you're the gal who was worried about fortune hunters," Jeanie said bitterly.

"This is different. Hugh's not like that scheming Al Kinnard. Jeanie, don't be mad at me. I've only got thirty days. Besides, I like Hugh. It would be a good practical deal."

"You're a spoiled, grabby darn—"

Donna's eyes widened. "Why, Trouble, I get it now. You're in love with him yourself. That's why you've been mooning around here."

"I'm getting out of this place. Pronto!"

"Don't be silly. Where would you go? Stick around. A little competition doesn't worry me any."

Jeanie grabbed up her warbag and shouted, "Good-by!"

She limped down to the corral and threw her rickety old saddle on Nip and tied the warbag behind the cantle. Forlornly, she set out for Gunpowder.

IT WAS late afternoon when she reached the town, and the street was baking. Old Sam Remson had his chair in the yawning, shady mouth of his livery barn, wielding his toothpick in a way that reminded Jeanie that she was hungry.

She dismounted and marched up to him and said, "Sam, I'm looking for a job."

His brows lifted. "Had a row with Donna, hey? Hear tell you had that mining engineer fighting over you last night, too."

"It wasn't like that! Sam, you're an old gossip."

"Yup. Man in this business hears everything about everybody." He paused and worked the toothpick. "About that job, now. Osgood's got this town so strait-laced respectable it's like to die on its feet, but he ain't got any law passed against eating. The café might have waitress work—"

"Sam, I'll work for you. There's that room over your office. I could fix it up, and if you could pay me just enough for my meals—Sam, you always did say you hankered to go prospecting, but that this livery kept you tied down."

"A gal running a livery?" He snorted. "Never heard of—"

"You've heard of it now," Jeanie said. "Sam, please—"

She was running the livery next day. She cleaned up the tiny office, burned trash, brought some order to the saddle and harness racks.

There wasn't much business, except for ranchers who stuck to horses because they liked them. Most folks rode around in cars and trucks these days. Only the fact that there was a lot of hill country where only a horse could go kept the livery in business. The few customers who did show up—Doc Tretworth, and some drummers who had to

make calls in the hills—didn't seem to mind saddling their own mounts when a pretty girl asked them to.

She made out fine with the horses. She was able to give Nip the best of care. And old Sam, before he lit out prospecting, had bought her a meal ticket at the café.

But though she asked everybody, no one seemed to know what Hugh Dalton was doing. Maybe he had left the country. Maybe Donna had landed him and they'd gone somewhere to get married.

As the week progressed, Jeanie became more and more jumpy. If she didn't find out something soon she'd explode. At first this job had seemed ideal, but now she wondered. The hours were long, and at night she was too tuckered to go riding around.

"I think he's beginning to care! He's seeing more of me and less of his horse now!"

Donna rode in on Friday afternoon. She looked at Jeanie and said, "Howdy, Trouble. Got yourself kind of tied down, didn't you? And Hughie's got that suspended sentence and can't come into town. He was out to the ranch the other day. I made him a berry pie."

Hughie, Jeanie thought. So that's the way it was now. "Where is he?" she demanded with a slight scowl for Donna.

Donna gestured toward the Gunpowder Hills. "Over there on the other side, near your mine, happily drilling holes in the ground. I'm getting aggravated with him. All he thinks about are those gadgets of his. I'm on my way to the bank right now to buy up all his notes. Gonna take his toys away from him and then break the big news that he's gonna marry me or else. I've only got three weeks left, you know."

"Why, you loco, schemin'— You mean you'd propose?"

Donna laughed gaily. "Those rainbows again! Sure I will. But I aim to have that man-critter roped proper when I do it." She reined her horse away and jogged toward the bank.

Old Sam came in from the hills on Saturday. He was creaky and had blisters on his hands and no gold at all. He thrust his gray head under the water-trough pump and made waving motions with his arm.

Jeanie worked the handle and he spluttered and snorted, letting the water run over his head, and then straightened. "Fergot how dry it was in them hills. And hot! A man's like to fry—"

"Sam," Jeanie said, "I've got to have the rest of the day off."

He looked at her shrewdly, but nodded. She saddled Nip and rode out into the Gunpowder Hills.

HUGH DALTON had his prospecting rig set up on a hillside a hundred yards from the boundary of the Lucky Ledge claim. There was a big wooden tripod and a piece of pipe that disappeared into the ground at an angle, and a gas engine that wheezed and chugged as it turned the pipe.

Hugh's battered truck was nearby. Since Nip didn't favor going near that unfamiliar stuff, Jeanie dismounted and went in afoot.

Hugh and his helper, an unshaven and surly man named Lute Cully, were sitting on boxes, staring out over the desert. They didn't hear Jeanie's yell because of the racket the engine made. She went over and touched Hugh's shoulder.

He jumped up, took her arm and steered

her back to Nip's side where they could hear each other.

Jeanie asked, "What on earth are you doing out here? This isn't any of Osgood's property. I mean, if you're not getting paid for it, why—"

He grinned at her. "Just stubborn, like all miners. We've put three holes down here and we're working on the fourth, just to make sure. You don't like mining, do you?"

Jeanie sniffed. "I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot—" She checked herself. This was exactly the way she'd messed things up before.

"Then we won't talk about it," he said gently. "Except for—"

"Yes, we will. I'm curious about that contraption there."

"It's a diamond drill. Diamonds on the end of that pipe chew through the rock, leaving a core in the middle that we can take out and see just what's underground. This way we *know* what's down there."

"Sure—rock." Jeanie was thinking that it was just like a miner to use diamonds to make holes in the ground, instead of putting one of them on a girl's finger.

She forced a little laugh. "Well, it's a good thing it makes little holes. If they were big ones like the old-timers made, you'd have the whole country caving in. Where are you staying?"

"Right here. Sleeping in the truck, cooking meals on a fire. Lute doesn't like it much. He was going to quit me but changed his mind. That dirty trick the old judge pulled on me—"

Jeanie kicked at a rock. "I'm sorry about that deal. Hugh, I didn't mean to fall against that guy, honest."

"I savvy that. Beachey and the other two have been snooping around out here, looking for trouble I guess, but I ran 'em off. Say, you do own the Lucky Ledge over there, don't you?"

"That hole in the ground, with bats and rattlesnakes in it? I sure do." She looked at him shyly. "Has—has Donna been here?"

"Several times. Not since yesterday, though. Mighty pretty gal."

"She sure is," Jeanie said faintly. She yearned to tell him about the notes and all the rest of it, but somehow couldn't bring herself to tattle.

"But," he said, slipping his arms about her slim waist, "it happens she ain't the one I'm in love with."

Jeanie held her breath, lifting her lips with trembling eagerness. She crossed her fingers. If only that jinx would hold off a moment—

The kiss lasted several moments. Her heart cut capers and she clung to him, not caring about breathing now. It ended when Hugh jumped and said, "Ow!"

Jeanie laughed unsteadily. She hadn't noticed it before, but they had come up on Nip's off-side. Jeanie could do that, but no man could. The horse had reached around and nipped Hugh's thigh.

She explained about it. Hugh rubbed his thigh and looked at Nip with a sudden grin. "Why, the wily old cuss! Look at him, pleased because he got away with something. Like a kid that's been up to mischief."

WHEN JEANIE got back to Gunpowder she was so jam-packed with rainbows that she threw her arms around old Sam, who was sitting in the livery office, and kissed the bald spot on the top of his head.

He looked at her shrewdly. "Recalling my younger days, I'd say you been kissed."

"Several times!" She fluffed out her hair. She'd put a crimp in Donna's game this time. "Oh, Sam, I'm all twitters. He wants to marry me!"

"Um. That young mining feller, I reckon. Well, you couldn't of picked an hombre that's flatter broke." Sam yawned. "Me, I'm too old for prospecting. Aim to hit that hotel bed and sleep for a week."

"I'll lock up," Jeanie offered.

But when Sam was gone she sank into a chair. Her head was working again now. Hugh sure was broke, and when Donna uncorked that business about the notes, anything might happen. Maybe, to be coldly practical about it, a pretty girl with money could lure a broke hombre away from one without it.

She had to do something. She had to help Hugh out of that jam.

On Monday morning she called on the hawk-nosed banker. He started off by telling her that the notes were none of her proper business, and wound up by bragging that Donna had bought them at a premium price that gave the bank a profit.

Jeanie stomped out and crossed the street to the judge's office. She let the door slam behind her and she said, "You old crook!"

Osgood squirmed his wrinkled neck around in his collar. "Now see here, Miss Jones, you can't talk to me like—"

"You pulled a crooked deal on Hugh, and now Donna Cline's bought up the notes on the money he owes."

"Perfectly legal. My contract with that young upstart contained a cancellation clause that he likely didn't read. And as for buying up notes, anyone so inclined can invest in paper. If Miss Cline has a romantic attraction—"

"Just as romantic," Jeanie said, "as a bear trap!" She put her fists on her hips and leaned forward wrathfully. "Well, how about Beachey and those other two crooks? I saw them lounging around right here in town all day yesterday. How about that?"

"I—amended their sentences. They've been hired to work for a big mining man who's in town. Name of Lafferty—"

"And you figure you'll unload some of your no-good claims on him!" Jeanie said.

The judge seemed uncomfortable. "Matter of fact, it's your Lucky Ledge he seems interested in."

Jeanie gaped. "What would he want with that hole in the ground?"

"Produced a lot of gold once, didn't it? Man wants to buy something, you don't argue him out of it."

"Ha!" Jeanie said suspiciously. "If I did happen to sell it I'll bet you'd appoint that Al Kinnard as my guardian. I think the two of you are in cahoots."

She whirled and got out of there, leaving the judge snorting with indignation. On the walk, she slowed down. If somebody wanted to buy the Ledge, why not sell it to him? It was no crookeder than the rest of the goings-on around this town. And she sure could use the money to help Hugh.

She went straight to the hotel, but the clerk told her that Mr. Lafferty was out. "He mentioned something about hiring a horse and going out to look over a mine."

Jeanie ran all the way to the livery. The easy mark was gone. "Just rode out," old Sam reported, "with them three hardcases. That's their dust you can see up the road."

SHE HIT the road at a gallop. "Jinx," she breathed, "get away from me. Just this once—" She caught up with the riders when they topped the Gunpowder Hills. They looked around at her warily, then drew rein.

"Mr. Lafferty?" she said, speaking to the fat little man in town clothes, the one who hadn't been with the other three that day in court.

When he nodded she said, "I'm Jeanie Jones. I own the Lucky Ledge, and I heard you want to buy it."

The men stirred in their saddles, all of them looking at Lafferty. He seemed to find something funny in this.

He chuckled as he said, "Well now, Miss Jones, I was prepared to pay you—uh—a small sum for the mine, but now I've got a better idea. A sure thing and no kickbacks later on, eh, boys? Beachey, put a gun on her."

Beachey drew a gun from his pocket. The man with the scarred face grabbed the cheek-strap of Nip's bridle. Jeanie gasped and stiffened. "What's this?" she demanded.

Lafferty chuckled some more. "Just a precaution. I'm afraid your price would be a little steep, now that your diamond driller has found gold in the mine. Oh, it's not as much of a secret as he thought. His man Cully likes the feel of folding money."

"You're loco," Jeanie burst out. "He—he isn't even drilling on my claim!"

"Not on it. Under it. He drills at an angle and goes way out under the ground. He struck gold in your vein with the first hole and put down the others to make sure it wasn't just a pocket. Didn't he tell you about it?"

"I never gave him a chance," Jeanie said,

bitterly recalling the way she'd thrown sparks every time he talked mining.

"Odd— Well, we're calling on him now. You'll come along, and you'll keep quiet. Beachey, keep that gun on her but get it under cover when we get to his rig. This is cheaper than buying a mine, eh, boys?"

That darn old jinx, Jeanie thought. . . .

When they reached the drill rig, Hugh was standing alone under the tripod with a wrench in his hand. The truck was gone. Lafferty got down from his saddle and waddled forward. Beachey remained on his horse, behind Jeanie. The other two men dismounted and backed up their boss.

"I'm Lafferty," the fat man said. "Where's Cully?"

"Gone after a load of water for the drill," Hugh said. "I've heard of you. A claim-jumping crook and a disgrace to mining." He looked at Jeanie. "Girl, what are you doing with these—"

"There's two ways out of this," Lafferty interrupted. "First, you can be a fool and we'll have to get rough." He tilted his head back toward the men behind him. "Or second, you can be reasonable. When the Jones girl signs the Ledge over to me, all tight and legal, I'll give you traveling money and the two of you can head far away and call it a deal."

"I'll just bet," Hugh growled.

"Please, Hugh," Jeanie cried. "I don't care what's in the darn old mine. It's not worth—"

HE DIDN'T seem to hear. Moving with the sudden lithe speed of a pouncing panther, he grabbed the fat little man and held him in front of him and then flung him against the other two.

The three of them went down in a heap. Hugh darted forward, kicking a gun from the hand of one of the scrambling men, bringing his wrench down on Lafferty's head, lunging upon the third.

Jeanie screamed a warning. Beachey had jumped down and was running past Nip, tilting his gun down for a shot. Hugh was just wrenching a gun from the hand of his present opponent, but he'd never be able to use it in time.

Beachey had made a mistake, though. He had come up past Nip on the off-side. The horse reached out quickly and got a portion of cloth and flesh between his teeth. Maybe because he sensed Jeanie's excitement, he bit hard this time. Beachey swore and twisted, trying to get free.

The gun that Hugh had gotten from the other man made a crashing report. Beachey jerked and stumbled down the slope, grabbing at his bleeding arm, dropping his gun.

The others lifted their hands hurriedly when Hugh swung back toward them.

Jeanie slid from her saddle and held the gun while Hugh got ropes and tied the prisoners. Beachey came in when he was told, still cursing his wound. Lafferty was stirring and groaning, so Hugh tied him too.

Then Hugh turned to Jeanie—and walked past her to pat old Nip's head.

"You know," he said, "I'm taking a liking to horses."

Jeanie stamped her foot. "But why didn't you tell me? About the gold, I mean!"

He came back to her. His eyes held warm glints that made her pulse break its reins.

"I had to be sure, and it wasn't till an hour ago that we punched into that vein again. I had to prove out the vein, prove that the gold carries along, because an ordinary pocket at that depth wouldn't be worth the digging."

"P-prove it to who?" Jeanie faltered.

"To the backers we'll get, to open the mine. I wanted to have it all lined up and hand it to you as a surprise. You disliked mining so, I didn't want to tell you and then disappoint you if it did turn out to be only a pocket. Gal, I'm in love with you. If you want a ranch and a bunch of horses you can have— Hey, what are you crying about?"

"Oh, Hugh!" she cried as she went into his arms, not stumbling over a thing now.

She clung to him, sure that the jinx was broken at last. She saw Donna riding down the hill, coming to spring that business about the notes, but it didn't matter now.

What mattered was that the rainbows had been right after all.

Sister Was a Wildcat

. . . AND Brother Wayne wanted to get rid of her boy friend

By Giles A. Lutz

IT WASN'T a very good fight. Ken was too fast for Murray Bates. Bates had been on the ground twice, and he was as slow as molasses getting up for the third time.

I danced around, swinging my fists and bobbing my head. I yelled, "Watch him, Ken. Watch his right."

Ken Holloway turned his head and grinned at me. He wasn't even marked or breathing heavy. He looked back at Bates, and his eyes grew hard, like pieces of flint.

Bates pushed halfway up, then collapsed into the dust of the vacant lot, whimpering a little. He bled at the nose, and his jaw had a lump on it.

Ken said in a voice that would cut glass, "If I ever catch you beating a horse again like that, I'll really go to work on you."

Bates said sullenly, "It's my horse. I'll do what I—" He looked at the fire in Ken's eyes and shut his mouth. He was acting smart.

Before I could say anything, a small tornado flew across the lot at Ken. It was my sister, Nancy Graves, and she was mad.

"I saw it," she cried. "I saw it all."

Ken backed away, his face startled. "Now, Nancy, honey."

"Don't you honey me," she said furiously. "Fighting again in front of Wayne."

I wanted to holler at her. Sis is the kind who thinks a twelve-year-old isn't grown up. She was always trying to watch over and baby me. She had been like that ever since my Mother died.

Most of the times I was proud of her. She was nineteen and little but as pretty as a new sorrel colt. She had shining red hair and gray eyes with flecks of green in them. I wasn't proud of her now. Not when she yelled at Ken like this in front of Murray Bates.

Ken tried to reason with her. "Nancy, this is something that had to be done."

"You always have an excuse," she yelled. "The last time you fought, you told me it wouldn't happen again. That was just a week ago. I've told you I didn't want Wayne to be around or to see violence. I've been determined about that ever since Robbin was killed—"

She quickly closed her mouth. She didn't have to. I knew about my brother being killed in a gun fight, even if I wasn't old enough to remember it. I had heard Sis and Dad talking about it. Both of them agreed that that's what had grieved Mother to death.

I remember Nancy saying a half-dozen times, "Wayne won't be exposed to violence. I'll see to that."

Dad had said mildly, "Nancy, you can't shelter the boy too much."

She sure tried, though. Just like she was trying now.

"We're through, Ken Holloway," she said. "I don't want to ever see you again."

His face went kind of white. I guess he thought she meant sure enough. He was tall and good-looking with curly black hair and white flashing teeth in a browned face. He was young to own as big a ranch as he did. He was a hard worker and a hard fighter.

He said, low-voiced, "There are times when you've just got to use force, Nancy." He looked at her stubborn face, and his eyes grew mad. He looked as though he felt this was one of the times now.

She tossed her head and turned away. She called, "Come along, Wayne."

"In a minute," I hollered at her.

SHE WALKED away, her back as stiff as a poker. Murray Bates was on his feet, grinning at Ken. Ken scowled at him, and Bates sidled away in a hurry.

"She doesn't mean it, Ken," I said. "She's just mad."

"She means it this time," he said mournfully. "She's happened along the last two times I've been in a fight, and she thinks that's all I do." He looked at me accusingly. "You being around to see them doesn't help me at all."

I said, "If you don't want me hanging around—"

He reached over and rumpled my hair. "You know better than that, pardner. But I sure wish she hadn't seen them."

I said eagerly, "I'll tell her none of those fights were your fault, Ken."

They weren't. He couldn't stand to see anything pushed around or abused, whether it was an animal or a man. He never picked a fight, but he never ducked one where one was called for.

He said slowly, "You stay out of this, Wayne. I don't want anyone pleading my case." He walked away, and his back had Nancy's stiffness. He was as hard-headed as she was.

She told Dad about it that evening at supper. Dad listened thoughtfully and said, "Bates is a bully. He's had a whipping long due him."

Nancy said hotly, "Anything can be settled without resorting to violence. I won't have a man who thinks with his fists."

Dad eyed her with a speculative look in his eyes. "Don't be too hasty, Nancy," he advised. "You're turning down the best bet of them all."

Her chin was firm and she said, "I've already told him I never wanted to see him again. I've made up my mind I would rather live in town."

"I wouldn't," I yelped. I thought of not going out to Ken's ranch and riding the pony he kept there for me, and it made me sick.

Nancy said tartly, "You're not old enough to have any judgment." She got up and started clearing away the dishes.

"You are," I yelled. "I guess you're showing—"

Dad said, "That'll be enough, Wayne." I knew that tone. I shut up.

I MOPED around the house, hoping Ken might come by. He always came into town for the week-end, and he spent every minute of it he could with Nancy. I heard a rap on the door, and my heart jumped. Ken wasn't as hard-headed as I thought he was.

I opened the door, and ole Elmer Giddings stood there. He was the cashier in

"May I have the next canter?"

the bank, and I didn't like him. He had oily hair and a white face. His hands were soft, and the few times he had been at the house, he'd acted as though I were some kind of a bug he wanted to step on. Elmer Giddings sure loved money; he wouldn't give you anything. Ken always gave me what change he had in his pocket.

Elmer Giddings frowned at me and asked, "Is Nancy in?"

I started to say she wasn't, but she came into the hallway. She had a big smile on her face and both hands outstretched to him. It made me sick so I left the house.

I found Ken sitting on the porch of the Stockman's Hotel. His hat was pulled over his eyes and he looked sour.

"Ken," I panted. "Ole Elmer Giddings is at the house."

He pushed back his hat and gave me a bleak look. He said slowly, "She didn't waste any time, did she?"

I couldn't believe it. He was just going to sit here. He wasn't going to do a thing.

I said, "You could beat him up."

He gave me a frozen grin. "That would sure fix things, wouldn't it?" He shook his head. "No, I'm a dead duck."

I said wildly, "If you won't do something, I will. "I ran down the street. I was too old to cry, but I sure felt like it.

I wandered around town, then, went home. Elmer was still there. I saw his pearl-gray topper on the stand in the hall and heard the murmur of his and Nancy's voices coming from the front room.

I stared in disgust at the topper. Ken wouldn't be seen dead in a hat like that. I raised my fist above the hat, then slowly lowered it. I didn't dare smash it.

I went upstairs to my room and stared out into the street. Something just had to be done, or Ken wouldn't be coming to town any more, and I wouldn't be going out to the ranch. Three years ago, Dad had planted a maple tree on the street side of the walk, just opposite my window. It was growing pretty tall. I guess I would have to look at that old maple the rest of my life.

ELMER was at the house every night the following week. Dad never said much when he was around. He always talked his head off to Ken. Nancy didn't look so happy to me, either.

Friday afternoon, the great idea hit me. Every night I had answered the door to Elmer's knock and had given him my most horrible face. He didn't like me a little bit, and if I could make it even more so— He was coming again tonight, and Nancy had asked him to supper tomorrow night.

I waited until about four o'clock in the afternoon. Dad was still at work, and Nancy was somewhere in the back of the house. I took a spool of her white thread, ran off a long length of it and dropped it out of my window, leaving the spool on the floor below the window-ledge.

I ran outside and looked around, and no

one was near. I grabbed up the loose end of the thread and hurried across the yard to the box I had put earlier beside the maple tree. I climbed up on the box and tied the end of the thread to a branch.

I jumped down, and, hanging above the walk, at just about the height of a man's head, was a thin, white loop of thread. It was hard to see.

I put the box away, and Nancy said sharply, "What are you doing?"

I gave her an injured glance and said, "Nothing. I can't even walk around the house without you snapping off my head. I'm going up to my room."

I shouldn't be trying to help her. She had made all this trouble herself.

In my room, I pulled carefully on the thread, raising the loop until it was higher than the tallest man's head. I let out some slack, and it lowered fine. I could make that old thread any height I wanted.

I only ate a few bites of supper, then hurried out of the room. As I left, I heard Dad ask, "Is he sick?"

Nancy's voice sounded strained. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He's been acting like that all week."

I sat at the window, holding the thread in my hand. Three different people came down the walk, and I was tempted to lower the loop to see how it would work. I didn't. I had to wait for Elmer.

He came down the walk promptly at seven o'clock. And he would be here tomorrow night at exactly six for supper. He wouldn't miss it a minute. Once, when Nancy sent me on an errand and I'd fooled around, Elmer had lectured me on how punctuality was the mark of character. That topper sat on his head, and he had a pleased expression on his face.

Carefully I lowered the thread. I had to hit it just right. If I got it too low, Elmer would walk into it with his face. If it was too high, I would miss his hat.

He walked under it, and it caught his hat a couple of inches above the band. The hat flew off his head, and his hands grabbed wildly for it. It lit behind him, bounced, then rolled a few feet down the walk. He went back and picked it up. He looked at it, his face anxious, then carefully rubbed it.

He set it on his head, moved back down the walk, and I snapped the hat off again. This was rich. I wished Ken was here.

Elmer stared wildly around before he bent to pick up the hat, and I snickered. I intended him to hear me, and he looked up at my window. He lifted his head and saw the thread hanging in the air, and he figured out pretty quick what had happened. I knew I hadn't better let him get his hands on me tonight.

HE PICKED up his hat and carried it to the door. This was one night I didn't answer it. But I sneaked down after he was inside and listened just outside the front room. If he told Nancy about it, she would fix me good.

I listened quite awhile, and he said nothing about it. I didn't think he would. He had looked pretty silly out there.

I slipped out of the back door and went to the Stockman's Hotel. Ken was on the porch, his feet cocked up on the railing, his hat hiding his face.

I said, "Elmer's at the house."

He pushed back the hat and yelled, "Why tell me about it?" His face was wild, and I backed a step. People in love do crazy things. Ken might even take a poke at me.

I said, "Ken, you be across the street at six o'clock tomorrow night. You just keep out of sight and watch. Whatever happens, you stay out of it. Will you promise?"

He didn't want to, but I finally got his word.

I went back to the house and heard Elmer's voice telling something about himself. I scowled at the voice. Maybe after tomorrow night I wouldn't hear it any more.

The following morning, I got a half dollar out of my bank and took it and a four-inch nail to Dan Thomas, the town blacksmith. I said, "Dan, can you cut the head off this nail and stick the half dollar on it so it won't come off?"

He grinned, holding the half dollar and nail in his hand. "Want to play a trick on someone, boy?"

I nodded and said anxiously, "Dan, it's between you and me."

"I won't breathe a word. You come back in a couple of hours."

I don't know what he did, but he had it stuck good. I pried on it all the way back to the house, and the half dollar stayed on.

I WAITED until about a quarter to six, and I couldn't wait any longer. I would have to to take the chance someone might come along before Elmer. I took my half dollar and went out to the walk. Nancy wouldn't see me, she was busy fixing the meal, and Dad wouldn't be home for a while.

It wasn't hard to find a crack in the wooden walk. I stuck the nail in it. It went almost all the way down. I put a rock on the coin and forced it the rest of the way until the half dollar was flush against the walk.

I hid around the corner of the house. I saw Ken come down the opposite side of the street and stop behind a big oak. I breathed hard. What if Elmer didn't even see the half dollar?

He came down the walk and glared up at my window. He glanced suspiciously overhead, and my heart sank. He would be too busy checking to see if the thread was there to even notice the half dollar. He sort of ducked his head as he passed my window, and his eyes went to the walk.

He stopped short and looked hurriedly around him. He stooped and tried to pick up the coin. He straightened, and his hand came away empty. He looked kind of surprised, then stooped again. He pulled at the half dollar, and I heard his low swearing. He got a finger nail under it and pried, then stuck the finger in his mouth. I knew he had broken the finger nail. His face was red, but he wasn't convinced yet when I came around the house.

"Yah, yah," I shouted. "Ole Elmer thought he found a half dollar."

He wanted to kill me for sure then. He straightened and ran at me, his face as red as fire.

I danced around, keeping out of his reach. "Did you break a finger nail, Elmer?" I taunted him.

He kept trying to get his hands on me, and I kept slipping away. His voice grew louder and louder. I heard Nancy at the front door, say, "What in the world?" and I knew it was time to let him catch me.

I hated to do it. Ole Elmer Giddings couldn't have caught me in a million years. Now, if Ken would only stay out of this.

Elmer's hands clamped on my shoulders. He shook me until my teeth rattled. He lifted one hand and slapped me across the face. It hurt. It raised tears in my eyes.

THE SECOND slap opened a beehive. Nancy flew across the yard at him. She grabbed my arm and jerked me loose, then she was all over him. She slapped him across the cheek, she scratched his face with her nails, she beat on his chest with her fists. And all the time she was so mad she was crying.

Elmer stumbled backwards, trying to cover his face with his arms. "Now, wait a minute, Nancy," he kept squalling. "Wait a minute."

She wasn't waiting for anything. She was a wildcat. I'm sure glad she never got that mad at me. Elmer finally gave up. He turned and fled up the street.

Nancy stood there, panting hard. She said, "Are you all right, Wayne?"

"I'm all right." I said. "What was the matter with him, Sis?" I beckoned Ken.

She was crying hard then. "I don't know," she sobbed. "If I ever see him again—" That was still mad cry.

She saw Ken's solemn, sympathetic face. He half held out his arms, and she flew into them. She wailed, "Oh, Ken. Wasn't it awful? Did you see it? I completely lost my head. But he was slapping Wayne!"

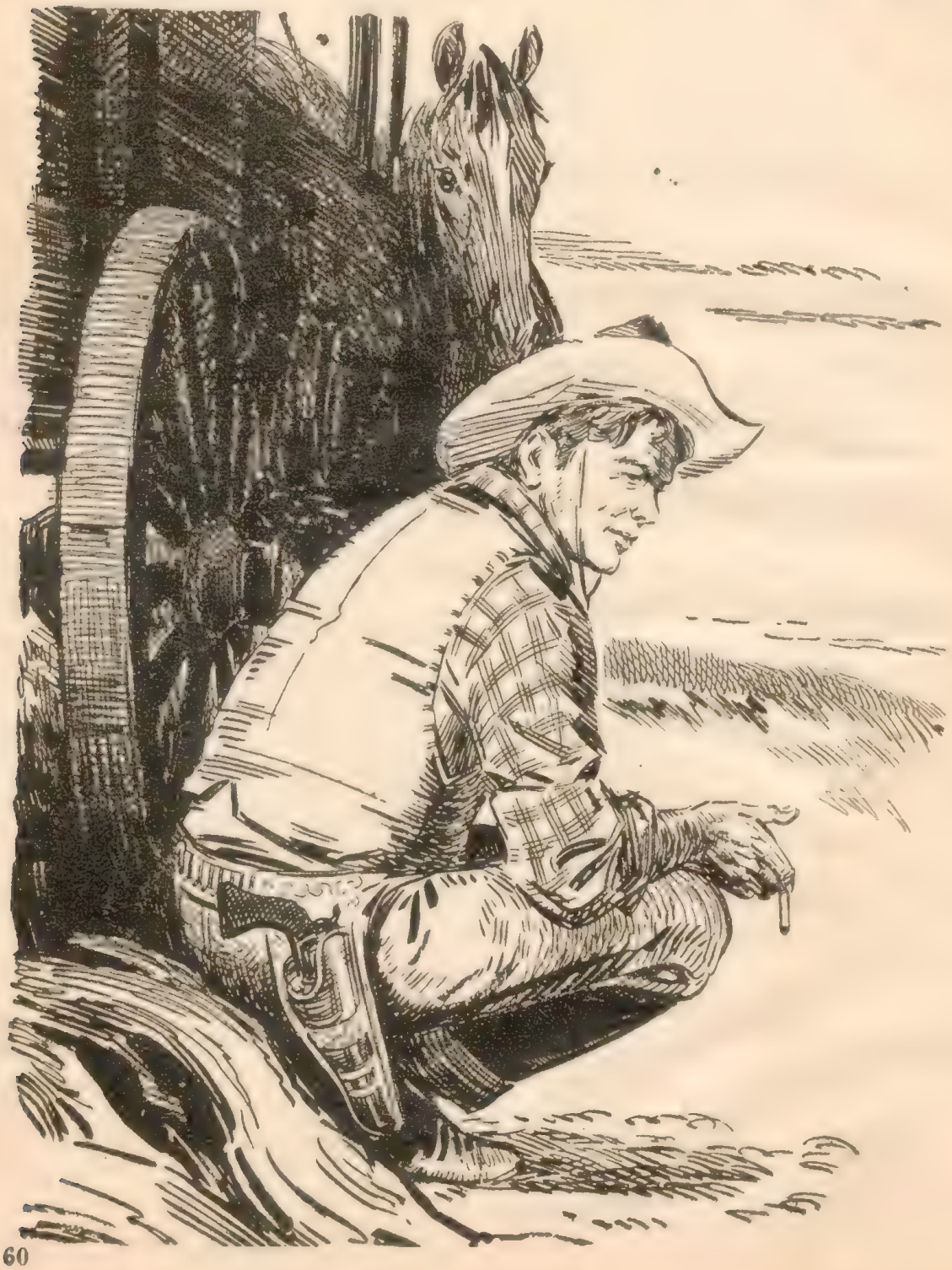
Ken murmured, "Honey, there are some times when you've just got to lose your head."

Her eyes were starry through her tears as she lifted her face to him. She hiccuped and said, "I—I guess you're right, Ken."

He winked at me before he bent his head to her. I guess now he would buy me all the ponies I wanted.

I watched them open-mouthed. They didn't care who might see them. Then I yawned and walked around the house to the shed. I had to get a chisel to get my half dollar loose.

SUPERSTITION



RANGE

by PARKER BONNER

SHE WAS ALONE in forbidden country with a tough crew of renegades, and her life depended on an outlaw's whim

PART ONE

BILL DRAKE'S crew rode into camp just before dark on that windy May day, fourteen trail-hardened men, not counting the bald-headed cook. They camped at the edge of the wash a full three miles north of Tucson, picketed their horses, put a guard out to watch them and built up a good-sized fire against the coming night's chill.

While the cook threw the chuck together, the crew spread their blankets with the practiced ease of men who have lived most of their lives in the open, then squatted around the fire, bearded and dust-caked from their long, weary days in the saddle.

Their eyes turned with unspoken longing toward the tiny cluster of lights which marked the town, for they had been on the trail three weeks, guarding a shipment of machinery that some fool was hauling south-

"I don't believe you're that bad," she told him

ward into the Sierra Madres for a copper property he was trying to open. The crew was burned out and thirsting.

Bill Drake knew how they felt, but he had given the order as they rode up, and he meant it. "No one rides into town before I say so. I'll shoot the first brush-jumper I find in the saloon."

They had not liked the order, but Bill Drake had ears as sharp as a coyote's and there was no grumbling. They waited in gloomy silence until the chuck was ready, shivering in the blast of the chill wind coming down the draw from the distant peaks. Then they ate, turned morose and sullen by their thoughts of the town's pleasures which they were missing.

Only Andy Drake was foolhardy enough to question his brother's orders. Andy was a good inch shorter than his brother and twenty pounds lighter for all that he stood six-two and weighed one-ninety.

"You're being a little rough," Andy said as he finished eating. He was conscious that the crew heard and watched him with concentrated attention. "The boys are weary and saddle-galled. A night in town will do them no harm."

Bill Drake looked at him. Bill was not used to having his orders questioned by anyone. His squarish face set in hard lines and his blue eyes looked smoky.

"You run your business," he said, "and let me run mine. The town is full of yellow legs and if I let the boys ride in there will be half a dozen dead soldiers by morning. I've got no time to be arguing with the cavalry right now. Get your rifle, since you're so full of beans, go out and relieve the horse guard. There are broncho Indians around and we don't want to lose our mounts."

He turned without further words and moved to the fire, leaving his younger brother to stare after him in wordless anger, conscious of the veiled looks of amusement from the crew.

To them, Andy was an outsider, even if he was Bill's brother, a kid who had ridden with them for less than three months. He picked up his rifle slowly and moved out.

I'm not Bill's slave, he was thinking bitterly. I've been in the saddle for days. I could use some liquor and perhaps a woman and it would be fun to see a town again, something beside this cindery waste through which we've been riding. I'd like to hear a piano, to listen to laughter, to see lights and gaiety.

HE WAS tempted after he relieved the horse guard to cut out his own bay, to saddle and ride in, but instead he moved along the rutted, sandy trail and sat on a rock a good two hundred yards below the camp.

The broken ground behind him rose sharply toward the wash's rim, shadowed and eerie in the thin light from the distant moon. He stayed there, motionless, lost in the shadow, watching. He did not believe that an Indian would come this close to town. But with the Apaches you never could tell. They might be anywhere.

The picketed horses stirred restlessly. Then, above their shifting noise, his quick ear caught the sound of someone riding toward him along the trail, the clink of metal ringing on a rock, someone on a shod horse. No Indian, and probably not a Mexican.

He rose and moved silently forward, shifting his rifle from the crook of his arm, keeping low so that he would not be outlined against the lighter sky. When the rider was directly opposite he stepped out, sang sharply, "Pull up."

There was a low exclamation and Andy Drake almost dropped his gun as he realized that the rider was a woman. She had checked her horse and sat motionless, watching him. "Who—who are you?"

Andy had recovered. "More to the point," his voice was harsh, "who are you, and what are you doing, riding this country alone at night? Only a fool would do that."

The girl did not relish being called a fool, but she was still nervous, still uncertain. "I'm looking for Bill Drake."

Andy's surprise came back. As far as he knew no one had any idea that Drake's crew was in this part of the country. Still, Bill never took anyone into his confidence, and he might well have arranged this meeting.

"And what would you be wanting with a mossback like Bill?"

She was not tall. Even on the back of her big roan she did not tower far above him. In the shadowed light he could see indistinctly that she wore a man's hat, low-crowned, with a wide brim, men's trousers and a brush jacket. Behind her saddle was a roll which he judged to be blankets, done up in a slicker. Certainly she looked as if she were set for travel, not just out for a pleasure ride, and his curiosity grew. But her answer gave him no satisfaction.

"I'll discuss that with Bill Drake," she said steadily. "That fire marks his camp, doesn't it, or am I wrong?"

"Could be," Andy said, still puzzled. "But I'm not certain Bill wants visitors."

"You might try asking." The girl's tone was short. "Tell him that Mr. Wakeman sent me, and that it will be to his advantage if he talks with me."

Andy considered her in the half darkness. He had met the lawyer Wakeman and did not like him. The man was too smooth, too certain of himself. He looked and acted more like a tinhorn gambler than a gentleman sworn to uphold the statutes of the United States courts, but he was an associate of Bill's, at times arranging business for the outlaw.

"All right," Andy decided. "I guess one female isn't going to stampede the crew. Step off that horse and I'll take you in."

THE GIRL dismounted. Taking the reins, Andy led the horse toward the campfire, with the girl following. As she had stepped out of the saddle her brush jacket had fallen open and he caught the glint of the gun holstered at her waist.

He had heard stories of women who wore men's clothes and rode with some of the outlaw bands, but he had never met one, and he kept glancing across his shoulder at the girl, trying to size her up as they moved into the circle of light cast by the flickering fire.

But it was hard to see her face, shadowed as it was by the low-drawn brim of her flat hat. He halted the horse and, handing her the reins, moved around to where Bill Drake had been talking to the bald-headed cook.

"What's this?"

Bill was seldom surprised, but he was surprised now, and Andy drew a small feeling of comfort from the knowledge that his older brother could at times be caught off balance. There was within Andy a lurking sense of humor which he managed to keep hidden from the world, but a glint of it showed in his dark eyes as he faced Bill.

"A little lady," he said, "come out from town to hunt you, with a message from Wakeman." He turned and motioned to the girl, and as she stepped forward he added, "I didn't get her name."

"It's Mary," said the girl, "Mary Thorne." She still held the horse's reins as she faced the older brother. "So you're Bill Drake?" Her eyes studied his bearded face.

The outlaw's lips split in a smile at her tone. "That's what they call me when they run out of worse names. What did Wakeman want, and how did he know we were here?"

"He saw you ride in at sunset."

Bill Drake's mouth twisted. "That's Wakeman. Always watching always sticking his nose into other people's business. Some day he may get it chopped off short. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Mary Thorne's eyes strayed to the men circled around the fire, studying each for an instant in turn. They were bearded faces, dust-caked. None except the cook was old, yet their eyes had an aged wariness, a huntedness, as if none of them was ever at ease.

They stared back at her, unmoving, unblinking, and in spite of herself she shivered a little as she told Drake, "I'd rather tell you alone."

There was a snicker from the circle of watching men, and Bill Drake turned deliberately on his high heel.

"Did anyone hear something that sounded funny?" His eyes raked their faces, but no one answered. The circle transferred its full attention from the girl to Drake, and Bill met their collective look.

"Only a jackass laughs at nothing." His eyes dared them to pick up the fight, but

none of them moved and he looked back at the girl.

"Get back to the horses," he told Andy, "and you, ma'am, come around the cook wagon." He fastened the girl's horse to one of the wagon's high wheels.

AS HE DID so, Mary Thorne glanced again at the circle of watching faces, noting the hunger, the desire, mirrored in their eyes, and the weight of their attention disturbed her. She glanced toward Andy in silent appeal, as if asking him not to leave her alone in this camp.

Bill Drake saw the look and understood, and smiled. Bill was quick at understanding people, at weighing them, and guessing at their hidden thoughts and motives. It was this ability which had kept him alive during seven troubled years on the frontier. It was this which had made him the undisputed leader of the most dangerous crew that had ever ridden at badlands of the Territory.

He could meet force with force, craft with craft. He was ruthless when the occasion indicated, or he could laugh, and he chose to laugh now, taking the girl's arm. His mocking eyes surveyed his brother across her shoulder.

"Never mind, Andy won't be far away—Get moving, kid."

Andy gave him a long, studying look before he turned and vanished into the night, quiet as a shadow. Bill watched him with approval and then led the girl around the wagon. Not until they were on its far side, screened by the high canvas cover from the firelight, did he pause to speak.

"So you want something from me. Do you know what I am?"

She said steadily, "I've heard them call you an outlaw."

Bill shrugged. He was not offended. "Most of the people who come to this hellhole have broken the law—sometimes a lot of laws. It doesn't matter what I'm called so long as they leave me alone."

"I don't care what you are." Her voice was low, but steady. "Mr. Wakeman says that you're the only white man who knows and will venture into the Superstition country."

Bill Drake's attention sharpened. "And what does anyone want to go into the Superstition for? The cavalry gives it a wide berth, and even the Tonto and White Mountain Indians wouldn't be caught dead in that country.

"The only Indians who ever go into it are the bronchos, the outcasts who are hunted by their tribesmen as much as they are by the whites. The whole place is supposed to be filled with evil spirits. Strange things happen in that country, things you can't explain, that no man can explain."

"Are you afraid of evil spirits?"

His grin was a little slow in coming. "The only evil spirits I'm afraid of is the liquor my crew loads up with in a saloon. It makes them harder to handle. As for the Superstitions, I wouldn't go into that or any other country without good reason, and as far as I know there is no good reason to go into the Superstitions."

"What about gold?"

HE WATCHED her. Then he started to chuckle. "Don't tell me you have an old Spanish map. Every saloon swamper north of Tombstone has one which he'll sell you for three drinks."

"I have a map," she said steadily. "It isn't Spanish and it is less than twenty years old. It shows the location of a wagon train which was burned in one of the canyons leading down from the Superstitions. That train was carrying over two hundred pounds of gold."

Bill Drake shrugged. "I've heard every lost treasure story that's been told in the territory and I believe none of them. Certainly I'm not going to ride my crew through a hundred miles of the roughest country this side of hell merely on the strength of an old map. You can forget it, sister, and go get somebody else."

Mary Thorne was startled. "You don't mean that?"

It was obvious that the possibility that Drake might refuse to go had not even occurred to her.

Her voice got a little desperate. "But the gold is there. My uncle drew this map, and he told me all about it, and he was the only

man who escaped from the train and lived."

"Look." Bill Drake sounded as if he were trying to be patient. "You had a good glance at the men grouped around the fire. They are thieves and murderers and cutthroats. The only reason they ride with me is because they know that I will lead them on no wild goose chases.

"In this Territory people call them Drake's private army and are afraid of us, and the Indians leave us alone. We are more effective than the yellow legs from Verde and Wingate and Apache. The stage company knows it, and the traders know it, and the mine owners know it. They pay us to guard their shipments, they pay us to bring stolen stock back from Mexico, but no one will pay us for riding with you after a lost treasure."

"I'll pay you. You'll get a full share of the gold. You've just got to go. Mr. Wakeman says that the Indians have broken out

The bullets felled Wakeman

of San Carlos, that no one is safe to cross the country unless they have a full company of cavalry as a guard."

"That's right."

"So you've just got to go with me."

"Ma'am," Bill Drake said, "ten years ago a man told me I had to go to prison. I broke his head and I left Kansas, and no one has told me what I have to do since—" He broke off as boots scuffed in the dust behind him. He swung around angrily as Andy stepped out of the circling darkness.

"I thought I told you to stay with the horses."

Andy's face was unreadable. "This is your popular night," he said. "There's a man waiting down the trail. He wants to talk and he didn't want to come in to the fire. I think maybe you better go out and see what he wants. He might have something to interest you."

BILL DRAKE looked at his brother for a long moment, trying to read his meaning. Then he glanced at Mary Thorne. After a moment he muttered, "Stay with her," and, turning, vanished toward the trail.

Andy looked after him until he was certain that Bill had gone, then he looked back at the girl, his wide mouth twisting a little.

"Ain't often we have this much excitement, all in one night." He hunkered down on his heels, his back against the spokes of the high wagon wheel and motioned her to a nearby rock. "Might as well take it easy. Bill will be gone a few minutes."

Mary Thorne walked slowly over to the rock and sat down. Andy watched her with shrewd attention. "What's the matter? Didn't Bill like your proposition?"

"No."

"You're lucky. Go get your horse. Circle around the trail and ride back to town while you can. Bill's a bad one."

She looked at him, startled. "That's a strange way for you to talk about the man you ride with."

"He's my brother," said Andy. "I kind of inherited him. I guess maybe I'm no better than he is."

"What would he do if he heard you talking this way?"

"Probably laugh. Us Drakes are great at laughing, even when we're fixing to kill someone."

"Now you're trying to scare me. You're joking."

"Sure," said Andy, "I'm joking. Where do you come from, anyway? Haven't you heard the stories they tell about Drake's army; how we burn ranches and blame it on the Apaches; how we murder children

and carry off women? You'd better talk to the people in Tucson, or to the colonel at the fort. They'd tell you to stay miles away from Drake's army. Any of them would hang us if they could."

She looked at him, noted the bitter lines about his mouth. "I don't believe you're that bad. Your brother just told me that you make your living guarding the stagecoaches and the ore shipments. Most outlaws would hold them up."

Andy laughed shortly. "And so would we, if we weren't being paid to guard them. When they don't pay we do hold them up. We win either way. Everyone's afraid of Bill, even his own crew."

"Are you afraid of him?"

Andy thought about it slowly. "I don't know," he said finally, with an engaging show of frankness. "I've only been out here three months. Ask me after I've been here a year."

She sounded almost peevish. "I wish I knew how much of what you say you mean, and how much of it is kidding. Frankly, I think that you're amusing yourself by trying to frighten me."

"Suit yourself." Andy's tone was brusque. He came to his feet in one easy motion. "Stay here. Don't move, or you'll get into trouble." He was gone, fading noiselessly into the darkness.

ANDY MOVED on feet as silent as an Apache's, crossing the broken bottom of the wash to the trail and following it until he was topped by the low murmur of voices ahead. He crept forward then, using the rocks as shelter, to a point where he could hear everything that was being said. The man talking to his brother was the lawyer, Wakeman, and he was arguing heatedly in an undertone.

"I tell you, Bill, this is no wild goose chase. I remembered the last time that girl's uncle came back to Tucson, and I've checked up on the rest of her story. It's all true. The original party had eleven men and three wagons. They were in the Superstitions all one summer and were headed out when the Indians jumped them.

"All but two were killed, both of them were wounded, but they managed to get back to Tucson somehow. One of them died a week later, the second, this girl's uncle, had an arrow cut out of his neck, but he pulled through and went home to Texas. Before he left he sold two nuggets that he'd been carrying in his pocket. They are as big as robin eggs. Silas Martin at the hotel still wears one of them on his watch chain."

Bill Drake still sounded skeptical. "Seems as if the boys had seen that gold they'd have back-tracked him?"

"They tried," said Wakeman. "It was only a couple of years after the war. There were few troops in the Territory, and the Indians were bad. One of them got slaughtered and the rest pulled back to town. Twice since, the girl's uncle has come back, but he had no luck. His health was pretty well shot. He wouldn't tell anyone exactly where the lost train was located and they wouldn't take a chance on going with him blind."

"I don't blame them," said Bill Drake. "These treasure stories are all alike, and a lot of men have lost their hair, hunting for gold which never existed."

"This exists." The lawyer's voice was harsh with greed. "Fifty thousand dollars worth of gold, at least. Think of it, Bill. Fifty thousand dollars that we can split between us."

"What about the girl?"

A crafty note sounded in Wakeman's voice. "Nothing about her. I was the first one she talked to when she got to town, and I made certain that she told the story to no one else. Supposing that she should disappear. Who would ever guess where she had gone?

"Certainly nothing would lead anyone to suspect that she had gone with you," he went on. "This is the chance we've both been waiting for. This is the chance to get a stake, to get the hell out of this God-forsaken country. Fifty thousand dollars in gold!" He rolled the words off his tongue as if he enjoyed uttering them. "Think what you could do with your share."

"I am thinking," said Drake, and there was a note of hidden laughter in his voice. "Are you certain you told no one in Tucson

that the girl was riding out to my camp, or that you were coming here tonight?"

"Of course I told no one." Wakeman was impatient. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I think maybe you are." Bill Drake had drawn his gun. He fired deliberately, three times. "A hundred per cent is better than half any time, my friend."

Wakeman did not answer. Wakeman was dead. For a long moment Bill Drake stood over the lawyer's body, his heavy gun hanging loosely in his big hand. Then he reholstered it, stooped and, catching up the man under the arms, dragged the limp body off the trail.

THE CAMP, at the sound of the shots, exploded into life. Men around the campfire leaped to their feet, calling to each other, calling Bill's name.

Andy glanced quickly around. He had no desire to have his brother guess that he had been a witness to the murder. He had known that Bill was hard, but he had never seen a man shot down in cold blood before. He ghosted back toward the wash's rim, curiously shaken, and followed it, coming down again beyond the chuckwagon.

Mary Thorne was on her feet, staring into the darkness as the crew raced out along the trail. She did not see Andy until he spoke, then swung around, pressing the back of her small hand across her lips.

"Those shots?"

Andy shrugged. His voice was tight as he told her hoarsely, "Remember, I've been with you for the full time. I never left you."

She stared at him, her panic growing at the gravity in his tone. "I don't underst—"

He caught her arm quickly. "You don't have to. Just keep quiet. Don't ask questions. Come on."

He knew that Bill would be suspicious unless he showed a natural curiosity, but they had hardly rounded the end of the wagon before they met Bill coming toward them, followed by the rest of the men.

"What happened?"

Bill Drake stopped. He looked at Andy, then at the girl. His easy smile came up to part his lips, but it failed to reach his eyes.

"Nothing to get excited about. Just a coyote that got too nosy." He turned to the cook and his manner became brisk and businesslike.

"Fetch a lantern. The rest of you bring up the horses and get your duffels loaded."

The crew was used to the swift changes of Bill's mind, but this time he had caught them flatfooted and they started to grumble.

Bill's voice hardened. "We're pulling out. If anyone doesn't like it he can cut loose and ride on into town."

FOR A MOMENT they hesitated. Then slowly they turned toward the fire, beginning to roll up the blankets which they had spread only a short hour before. Bill took the lantern and led the girl to the far side of the wagon. He ignored the fact that Andy followed them.

Bill said to Mary Thorne, "Let's have a look at that map."

Surprise was in her voice, "But I thought you—"

"Never think," he said. "I've changed my mind. If you have a map a man can read, we'll have a try for your gold."

The girl looked at him, hesitating. "First," she said slowly, "I think we should talk about shares."

"Why, sure." Bill Drake was suddenly easy to please. "What would you figure is the proper divvy?"

Her uncertainty grew. "Well, I'll have to pay Mr. Wakeman for his trouble, and you'll have to pay your crew. Supposing we split whatever gold we find. You pay your men from your share. I'll take care of Mr. Wakeman."

Bill Drake pretended to study the proposition. Watching him, Andy thought that his brother would have made a great actor or a great gambler.

He said slowly, "Why, that sounds fair. Of course, I won't have much for myself once I pay the men and Andy here." He threw a sly glance toward his watching brother. "Andy will want everything that I get. But it's a deal. Let's look at the map."

She drew out the square, folded paper and silently handed it to Bill Drake. He motioned Andy forward to hold the lantern and, spreading out the map, studied the

wavering lines, grunting to himself as he puzzled out each landmark, tracing over the route with a stubby forefinger.

The girl watched him, making no effort to conceal her eagerness. "Do you think you can find it?"

He looked at the paper for a full minute longer before lifting his eyes to her face. "I think I can. That is, if your uncle knew what he was doing when he drew this. The country is very rough. Every canyon looks the same. A man can get lost within a mile of his own camp. It's big, and it's dry, and there's a good chance that we won't come out alive."

He folded the paper slowly. "But we'll find it, if it's there to be found. This shows where the wagon train was burned, but it tells nothing about the gold. Did they manage to hide it, or was it still in the wagon when the Indians broke through?"

The girl said steadily, "They hid it. My uncle told me where it is. If you can find the wagon train, then I'll tell you where the gold is hidden, but I won't tell you now. If I did there would be no need for you to take me along. I don't trust you that far, Bill Drake."

Andy expected his brother to show anger. Instead, Bill was chuckling before she finished.

"I like her," he said to Andy. "I like people who don't trust me. It shows that they've got good sense. Get your gear together and get her horse. We're rolling out."

He turned, thrusting the folded map into the front of his stained shirt, and went around the wagon, leaving Andy and the girl to stare at each other.

Mary Thorne said slowly, "I've never met anyone quite like him. One minute he tells me that he has no interest in my gold; the next he can't even wait until morning before pulling out. I wonder what made him change his mind."

Andy knew why Bill was pulling out so hurriedly. He knew that his brother wanted to be well away from Tucson before anyone came looking for Wakeman. He had the impulse to tell her, to try to get her away from camp as quickly as he could, but he guessed that Bill would never let her return to Tucson.

In the short time since he had joined the band, Andy had noted that there was nothing careless about his brother's lawlessness. Bill seldom left anything to chance. He would have Wakeman's body hidden and he would not leave the girl behind to perhaps tell that he had been connected with Wakeman.

INSTEAD of speaking, Andy turned toward the horses. Most of the crew were already saddling, and he quickly loaded his gear onto the bay, then he led it back to the chuckwagon, left it with the girl and went around to get her horse.

As he came back, a riderless mount broke out of the bushes and nosed over to the other horses. Andy heard Mary Thorne catch her breath sharply, and turned to see her stare at the saddled animal with widening eyes.

She came forward slowly, reaching out to touch a dark stain which smeared across the saddle, then she turned to find Andy's eyes upon her and said in a stifled voice, "Blood. And that's Mr. Wakeman's horse. I've seen him ride it. I've—"

The words caught in her throat. The next instant she seized the reins of her own mount and, swinging up into the saddle, spun it toward the trail.

But quick as she was, Andy was quicker. He caught the bridle before the horse was half way around and jerked it back, saying in a sharp undertone, "Where do you think you're going?"

She raised her small whip as if to strike him. "Let go, I'm going back to Tucson."

His free hand came up, caught the whip and wrenched it from her grasp.

"You're not going anywhere," he told her sharply. "Not unless you want to get yourself killed. Now, stop acting silly and whatever happens, remember, you did not see Wakeman's horse."

He did not wait for her answer, but, sweeping off his hat, he cut it sharply across the nose of the lawyer's horse. The animal reared, pivoted on its hind feet and dove off into the deep shadows.

For a moment the girl was too startled to speak, then she said angrily, "But your brother killed—"

"Shut up!" Andy grabbed her arm and almost shook her out of the saddle. "You know nothing about it. You understand? Nothing. If Bill even suspects that you've guessed, I wouldn't give a penny for your life."

Her eyes were very wide. "But—but what's going to happen?"

"Who knows?" Andy's young face was suddenly very old in the yellow lantern light. "And you'd better pray that we never find the gold. You're fairly safe until we do. Bill has very little use for women as such. He'll probably let you alone, and as long as he has any use for you he'll see that the crew does."

She shivered.

"But he won't let you get away. If you try it he'd probably have you killed."

"But what will happen if we find the gold? What then?"

"I don't know," said Andy, and, turning, led the horses toward the fire.

THERE was little talk as the crew broke camp and headed northward, following roughly the course of the San Pedro. Only the scuff of the horses' shod feet and the creak of saddle leather blended with the grind from the sun-dried wheels of the chuckwagon.

There was almost no talk as the lights of Tucson dropped from sight behind them, masked by a low-lying ridge which paralleled the course they were traveling.

They left the trail and, as far as Mary Thorne could tell, cut out across the desert waste. But Bill Drake, riding at the head of the column, never hesitated.

The spaciousness of the country opened up and seemed to swallow them. The girl was not afraid of distance, since she had been used to the long sweep of endless Texas plains, but she was not used to the utter emptiness of this barren land.

The crew rode with watchful cautiousness. They were men trained to be alert for any danger, knowing that the emptiness which oppressed the girl was deceptive, that hostile Indians could be anywhere, that even the few whites they might encounter would not be friends.

Bill Drake set the pace and Bill did not hurry. He kept in mind that both men and horses had done thirty miles since the last sunup and that all were tired. They trotted and walked and then they dismounted and led their horses, and always they kept in in a packed group with the cook's wagon at their center, for to straggle might mean a swift and terrible death.

Mary Thorne rode between the creaking wagon and Andy, at times so close to the younger Drake that her stirrup brushed his in the half darkness. His mere closeness brought her a kind of forlorn comfort, an occasional relief from the surges of panic which continued to rise up through her. Only the discomfort of the trip took her attention off the fear which enveloped her.

On they rode through the swirling dust, doggedly, uncomplainingly, endlessly.

But her mind worked faster than their progress. She had no doubt that the shots she had heard had been fired by Drake and that those shots had killed Wakeman. Drake's reason for murdering the lawyer was far from clear. From Wakeman's words she had judged that the two men were friends, and she thought bitterly that not only Wakeman, but also she, was paying for the mistake the lawyer had made in trusting Drake.

She tried to peer ahead, past the row of shadowed riders, to where Drake rode alone, big, and easy, and tireless on his horse. And then the light came faintly from the east, turning the land around them grotesque and unreal and utterly unearthly as it deepened, showing the wind-etched banks, the huge piles of rocks that tumbled down the sides of the small canyon

Only Andy seemed real and solid, riding quietly beside her. Instinct told her that the younger Drake was different from the other members of the crew. There was something about him, a rebellious quality which set him apart, and there was humor in him, a sour, twisted quiet humor that nevertheless was a leavening which at times pierced the shell of his indifference.

If there was any safety for her, it must stem from Andy, and yet she was not certain that in a showdown he would come to her aid.

IT WAS full dawn before they halted, picketing the horses in a small draw, where a tiny spring sent out its slender trickle of water, to be lost a hundred feet below in the greedy sands of the dry river.

Stiffly she lifted herself from the saddle, marveling at the apparent tirelessness of these men. They had ridden all the preceding day, yet few of them showed any real signs of fatigue and they had so schooled their pace that their horses were still not exhausted.

That was the difference between the trained white and the Indian. An Indian would have covered the distance in one half the time and have killed his horse in the process.

But Drake's men lived by their horses and with their horses. They came out of the saddle, stiff and cold and grumpy, silent and morose, yet each man cared for his own mount before he turned back to the chuck-wagon where the cook was already doling out the warmed-over beans and the long strips of jerked meat.

Andy brought her a plate where she sat, a little to one side, alone, not quite a part of the camp. The rest of the crew ignored her, showing none of the sharp curiosity which had lighted their eyes on the preceding evening.

Bill Drake ignored her too, sitting on the wagon tongue, his hat shoved far back on his large head, seemingly unmindful of the crew, of the country or the morning chill. He ate in silence.

Not until he had drained the scalding coffee down to its last muddy dregs and tossed them away did he stir. Then he rose, rolling a cigarette, using a husk in the Mexican fashion and, crossing, lifted an ember from the fire, holding it lightly between his thumb and forefinger.

He turned then, facing the crew, and said in an easy voice, "You've all been wondering where we're headed. I'll tell you now. We're going gold hunting."

They shifted to watch him. Drake's hard black eyes were as bright as chips of polished lava rock and they held a spark of mockery as he added, "There won't be any digging, if that's what's worrying you. It was dug twenty years ago by this girl's uncle."

He indicated Mary Thorne with a sweeping gesture of his hand, and the mockery reached his lips, curving them. "If you have any ideas about her, forget them. She's a partner, nothing more." He waited, watching the men. They stared back at him. Even the cook ceased his operations and turned.

"She gave me a map," Drake added. "It shows where her uncle's party was bushwhacked by Indians. At the time, they were carrying two hundred pounds of gold."

Someone beyond the small fire drew his breath sharply, and Bill Drake's smile widened. "Yes," he repeated, "over two hundred pounds in gold. We're going in after it, and we're going to bring it out, and each one of you will get your fair share."

Monte Gordon straightened beyond the fire. Monte Gordon was almost as big as Bill Drake. "Going in where?" he asked.

"The Superstitions."

SILENCE lay for a full minute across the men, and it was Drake who broke it. "You aren't afraid to go into the Superstitions, are you, Monte?"

Monte Gordon was big boned, but his body had been thinned down by much riding, and his tissues were dried out from lack of water. His nose had been broken in some forgotten saloon brawl, and the last joint of his center finger was missing from his left hand.

"I'm not afraid of anything." He was a boastful man. The boastfulness showed in the cant of his shoulders, in the little swagger with which he walked, and in the way his coarse, red hair stood almost upright from his round skull. He turned his green eyes toward the girl, looking her over, as if he were inspecting a horse, a half sneering, twisting smile lifting one corner of his thin mouth.

His mere closeness brought her a kind of forlorn comfort

Mary Thorne met the look and let her eyes fall away, and felt the color rush up into her cheeks. She was angry with Drake, and angrier at Gordon, but much more angry with herself for showing any emotion. She'd glanced sideways at Andy and found that the younger Drake was watching Gordon without appearing to.

Bill Drake had not taken his attention from Gordon's face. He said, slurring the words a little, "Of course you aren't afraid of anything, Monte. You're a big, brave, strong man. I've never doubted it. That's the reason you're riding with me."

The crew laughed as Gordon scowled and the laughter put them into better humor, which was what Bill Drake wanted. He was quick to seize the opportunity. He drew the folded map from his shirt.

"Come and look at this map. It's a good map, well drawn, and if it's accurate we should be able to find this canyon."

He squatted down and spread it on the ground as they crowded about him. Even the cook deserted the tailboard of the wagon to have his look, but Andy made no motion to join them. He lay four feet from Mary Thorne's elbow, his long legs extended, his body propped half upright against the rock.

She glanced at him again, saying in an undertone, "Don't you want to see the map?"

He turned a look upon her which had a certain leisureliness. "What for?"

She sounded angry. "Doesn't the gold interest you?"

He sat up, pulling his knees back until he could wrap his long arms around his shins. "Not much."

She was startled, distrusting his words. "But I thought that everyone wanted gold."

"Why?"

"Well, for what it will buy."

Andy Drake looked at her fully then. "All right. What will it buy?"

MARY THORNE was confused. She had never met anyone who affected her in the way Andy did. At times she trusted him, but he also could be very irritating, and she said sharply, "What does anyone ever want money for?"

"You got me," said Andy. "I never wanted much. I still don't."

She looked at him. "Are you making fun of me again?"

His voice was suddenly very gentle. "Maybe I am. You're pretty when you get mad."

She flushed.

"And you ruffle your feathers just like a bantam hen my mother used to have. I guess I'll call you Bantam."

"I don't like it." The girl was suddenly angry.

Andy told her seriously, "There'll be a lot of things you won't like, little Bantam." He had lowered his voice, and he glanced toward the group around the map to see if anyone was listening.

She caught her breath.

"That's what hunting for gold got you into." There was no amusement in Andy's eyes now. "There's not a man in that bunch who wouldn't slit a throat or shoot his best friend in the back. Most of them have, and their records with women aren't good."

She tried to sound confident. "I've got my gun."

He shook his head. "One gun, two guns, even three guns wouldn't do you any good if they got out of hand."

She bit her lip. "I've always taken care of myself, Andy Drake, and I'll take care of myself now."

"Suit yourself." He sounded as though he were getting angry.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know." He rose. "Pick yourself one of the men, I guess. Hang onto him. He'll protect you maybe, if he can. But be sure you pick a strong one."

He turned then, not waiting for her answer and strode across past the group around the fire, leaving the girl alone with her thoughts.

They were far from pleasant. When the horse had fallen with her father, leaving him a helpless cripple, it had seemed to her that she would have no great trouble in running the Texas ranch. But that was before three years of storms had cut their herd and before the bank loan had come due and there was no money to pay it.

NOW, THIS was her last desperate effort to save the ranch, and to raise the money for the operations which the doctors hoped might straighten her father's back.

Only when she had seen no other course had she thought of her uncle's tales of the lost wagon train. He had been dead for almost four years and she had not even known exactly where he had hidden the old map. She had searched through the house, finding it finally in the bottom of a cowhide trunk at the rear of the attic.

The treasure had never seemed real to her as a child. It had been one of the fairy stories to which she had listened with the greatest of enjoyment. But looking at the old map and reading her uncle's letters, it had seemed that all she needed to do was to come to the Territory, find the right men and recover the treasure. She had sent her father to stay with an aunt in Austin, had left the ranch in the hands of the foreman and had taken the new railroad to Tucson.

Her meeting with Wakeman had been no accident. The lawyer's name had appared in two of her uncle's letters and she had gone to his office at once, showing him the map and telling him the full story.

It had been Wakeman who had warned her not to tell anyone else in Tucson about the map. The warning had been unnecessary, since there were few people in the small mud-walled town whom she would have thought of taking into her confidence.

Her arrival had created enough stir, as there were few women in the Territory, and everyone had tried to be helpful. But she had kept her own counsel, and there was certainly nothing that would lead her newfound acquaintances to guess that she had joined Bill Drake, even if anyone in Tucson had known that the outlaw had camped so close to town on the preceding evening.

No one knew where she was, and she looked across to where the men were gathered about Drake, staring down at her map, arguing among themselves, and for the first time in her life she was seized with a feeling of utter helplessness.

She studied the bearded faces, looking for some hint of kindness and could find none. Even the bald-headed cook's small eyes showed a hungry greed which he made no attempt to hide.

Only the younger Drake showed no interest in the map. He stood, hip-shot, his weight resting on his right leg, his shoulder supported by the high wagon side, his thoughtful eyes on the men rather than the map. He was not looking at her, but his parting words had burned their way deeply into her brain.

"Pick yourself a man and let him protect you from the others if he can." That was what he'd told her, and she studied the group, knowing that his advice was sound, wondering which man she would be forced to pick.

Bill Drake was the obvious choice. Bill was the strongest man in camp, the one most feared by his companions. She might have some chance of safety if they thought she was Bill Drake's woman, but she shuddered inwardly at the very idea.

Bill Drake was a murderer. He had killed Wakeman and then come to her, smiling his little secret smile, unmoved and unaffected by his barbarous act. No, she felt, she would rather die than give herself to a man like Drake.

There was Monte Gordon. He was almost as large as Drake and he was a braggart. A man like Gordon would be easy to handle, much easier than Drake. But was he strong enough? He had to protect not only her, but the gold, from the other members of the crew.

She doubted it. Instinct warned her that with all his boasting, Monte Gordon would back down when the time came. He might make her promises, but she had no assurance that those promises would be kept. She needed someone stronger than Gordon, stronger than the whole crew.

In fact, she needed the whole crew, and suddenly a tiny smile twisted her lips. That was it, the whole crew. Why not promise each man something, make each man believe that he alone held her interest. Why not play them all, promising everything, giving nothing, playing them one against another.

THE THOUGHT brought a slight flush to her cheeks. She had known of women who made their living that way, who promised much and gave little and she had despised them. But in the situation she faced there was no room for niceties. Conventions played no part. Through no fault of her own, her future was bound to this crew of outlaws, these murderers. She knew that Bill Drake would not let her escape, that he would keep her until the gold had been rediscovered, that he needed her to find the gold. But after that, what did he plan to do with her?

She did not think that he realized that she had seen Wakeman's horse with the telltale stain of blood on the saddle, but after the gold was found he would have no need of her, and her eyes turned speculative as she watched the men.

She was a woman, and without being proud, she had known ever since she had begun to grow up that she had a beauty which attracted men. She had never traded on it particularly flirting only mildly at the school dances which were the sole form of entertainment close to her father's ranch, but she meant to trade on it now.

If only one member of the crew wanted her she would be in serious danger. If two were filled with desire they might fight it out and the winner take her, but if all fifteen were fascinated, then each would help keep the others within certain bounds.

For the first time in twelve hours she experienced a return of her normal self-confidence and she was ready to face the future, partly freed from the black despair which had gripped her all during the long night ride.

She looked again at Andy, thinking that if he had only been willing to help her the night before, if he had not prevented her when she tried to make her dash from camp, things might have been different.

But Andy, she now suspected, was as bad as any of them, and resolutely she put thoughts of him from her mind. She would treat him as she treated the others, using him as she used the others, and giving nothing more than she had to in return.

She was angry with him, without being able to explain to herself the real cause for this anger.

I'll show him, she thought. Let him watch. I'll give him plenty to watch if he's interested.

She rose, throwing a smile at the gathered men. None of them raised their heads. The smile was mocking, a little wicked as she gathered up her blankets and, crossing to a shadow thrown by a huge rock, arranged them on the hard ground. Then she went quietly to sleep.

MONTE GORDON was serving as horse guard. Never a man to exert himself when motion was unnecessary, he sat with his back against a boulder, his rifle across his outstretched knees, his hat drawn low to keep the hot afternoon sun from his eyes.

The camp slept. The horses drowsed, finding what little shade they could from the brush and the overhanging rocks. Heat waves came up from the scorched earth to eddy in the motionless air, hanging above the canyon floor like layers of almost translucent smoke.

Gordon yawned, squinting his green eyes against the glare. He looked older than his twenty-seven years. His fair skin had been roughened and reddened by constant burning until he had something of the appearance of an overdone lobster. His mouth was thin-lipped, cruel. The creases which ran up from the mouth corner toward his nose were deep and gave his narrow face a pinched look. His beard was thin, and against the darkened skin, the quarter-inch whitish stubble hardly showed.

He heard a sound and was at once alert, his powerful hands grasping the hot rifle. His apparent lassitude dropped away from him like a cloak. He was a man who could move quickly and sharply on occasions, and he brought the gun around in a half arc before he saw the girl.

He watched her, a slow grin spreading his thin lips. She moved up the uneven path toward where he sat. She had been to the spring and she managed to look clean and fresh, despite the heat and the dust and the fact that she had slept on the ground.

"The rest are sleeping," she said as she reached Gordon's side and stood above him smiling down at him. "But it's hot, far too hot to sleep."

His eyes measured her and liked what they saw, and his mouth quirked up. Monte Gordon had a very good opinion of himself. He considered that he was as fast with his gun as any man in the Territory. He had killed three times, not counting Mexicans, and had built himself a reputation for senseless cruelty.

He also prided himself in his conquests with women, and it did not surprise him that this girl, or any girl, would seek his company.

"Sit down." He motioned to a place which was partly in the shade. "This is a bad country for women."

"A bad country for anyone," she agreed as she settled herself at his side.

His voice was eager. "Tell me about the gold? Is it really there? You're sure your uncle knew what he was doing when he drew that map?"

SHE NODDED. "I've heard about it ever since I was a little girl. It was placer gold. They found it high up on the mountain and they worked it dry, tossing it in the air with a blanket. It was all good-sized nuggets, and they were coming out when they were attacked. The gold's there. We don't need to worry. The problem is, can we get it out? Will the Indians leave us alone?"

Monte Gordon could not help boasting. "The Apaches are afraid of us. Everyone in the Territory is afraid of us, even the yellow legs in the forts."

"They're afraid of Bill Drake," she corrected him. "They're not afraid of you."

The corners of Monte Gordon's thin mouth turned down sharply and he said in a resentful voice, "Where would Bill Drake be if it wasn't for us? He can't fight the Indians and the soldiers alone. Even he is only one man."

"But what a man." Bitterness crept into her tone and she stared off across the

[*Turn page*]

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broken land, apparently paying no attention to Gordon. "Everyone's afraid of him."

"I'm not." As soon as the words had left his lips, Monte Gordon glanced instinctively around. The motion was involuntary. He would not admit, even to himself, that he feared Bill Drake, but even so he wanted to be certain that his words had not been overheard.

Nothing in the camp below them stirred, and reassured, he looked again at the girl, then had a momentary doubt, wondering if she might not repeat what he had said. Looking at her, he could not make up his mind.

She was something new to him. She was not like the women he had known in the railroad towns in Kansas, or the girls who lived in the back alleys of Tombstone and the newer mining camps. She simply did not fit into his mental picture at all. She had no business riding across this waste, camping on the ground, sharing the meager food with the outlaws, and his voice turned suddenly harsh.

"What do you want?"

"Want?" Mary Thorne's eyes had widened. "Want? I want the gold that my uncle helped dig. I want it so badly that I've come a thousand miles. And now, I'm afraid that once I get it it will be taken away from me."

Monte Gordon was not a rapid thinker. He turned her words over in his mind, trying to search them for the hidden meaning. "You don't mean Indians? The Indians will leave us alone."

"I don't mean Indians."

"Nor the army?"

"Nor the army." Mary Thorne had a sudden impulse to laugh at him, to grasp his shoulders and shake him. She had not realized how stupid he could be.

"Then who are you afraid of?"

IT WAS her turn to glance across her shoulder. She would not have been surprised had she found Bill Drake's powerful figure standing behind her, grinning down at her. Her fear of Drake was a real, a poignant thing. She could not rid herself of it, but no one had moved in the camp below them. The barren land was empty.

She turned back to Gordon, saying in an even undertone, "A lawyer sent me out to see Bill Drake last night, a man named Wakeman."

Monte Gordon had known Wakeman. His interest, which had been dulled by the heat, stirred and sharpened. "Yes."

"Bill Drake murdered him. Those were the shots we all heard."

Monte Gordon had known this. One of the men who had been detailed to dispose of Wakeman's body was a friend, but he held his comment, merely nodding.

Mary Thorne went on. Her voice was now a little breathless. "With Wakeman dead, no one in Tucson knows that I am here, that I rode out with Drake. When the gold is found, what's to prevent Bill Drake from doing away with me?"

Monte Gordon found this amusing. To him murder was a simple, everyday act. A man was in your way and you killed him. But Monte Gordon had never yet had occasion to kill a woman. "Shame to do away with a girl as pretty as you are."

She knew that she flushed, and she did not try to meet his eyes. "Bill Drake doesn't care anything about that."

Gordon moved his head slowly. Bill Drake's lack of interest in women had always puzzled the crew, and Monte accepted her words without argument. "So, what is it you want?"

For a moment she was entirely honest. "I want to live."

His grin widened.

"And I want my gold."

He could understand that, too.

"And I have to have someone to protect me."

A small bell of warning sounded in Monte Gordon's dull brain. This woman had come seeking him because she wanted someone to protect her, to protect her from Bill Drake. This called for thought.

She was very desirable. He had never in his wild years met anyone who struck him as half so desirable, and he could imagine himself standing up to Bill Drake in a fight. He might even brag about his intention, but when it came to a showdown, could he

move faster than Drake? Had he any real chance of killing the outlaw leader?

Mary Thorne saw his hesitation and added quickly, "You've had a look at the map. You know that it shows where the wagons were attacked, but it does not show where the gold is buried. I'm the only one who knows how they put it into safety, and unless I tell—"

"Bill will make you tell," Gordon promised her.

She nodded. "He will unless you and some of your friends stand with me against him. If he would kill Wakeman to get the lawyer's share, he certainly would not hesitate to kill me, and it is possible that he might also want to get rid of some of the crew."

"He needs us." Gordon sounded confident. "He couldn't carry on without us."

She nodded again. "He needs you as long as he remains in the Territory. But what if he should arrange to get all the gold for himself? Then he could pull out. Then he would have no need for you or any of the rest of the crew."

THIS WAS a new thought. She watched Gordon as he considered it and saw by the change in his eyes that he believed that this was exactly what Drake would try to do.

Monte Gordon had never been loyal to anyone in his life, and it was not at all difficult for him to believe that Drake might easily desert the crew. Had the positions been reversed, that is exactly what he would have attempted, but he still argued with her weakly.

"You don't know for sure that that's what he plans."

"No," he admitted, "I don't know, but I have a feeling. I don't want to be killed. I don't want to be deserted, and I don't think you do. If you and I would work together we could make certain that he wouldn't get away with it."

He was wavering. "There's not a great deal we can do alone."

"No." Her smile warmed. "We can't do anything alone, but you must have friends among the men—friends who hate Drake as deeply as you do, friends who would stand with you, with whom we could share the gold. Afterwards, when it was safe, we could go back to my ranch."

Monte Gordon's pale eyes lighted. He was certain now that he had made a conquest and he was too vain to doubt that the girl was interested in him, but he had to question it. "How come you picked on me?"

She looked at him squarely, her dark eyes promising far more than her words, as she said softly, "Because you seem to be the strongest, the solidest man in the whole crew."

He was still not ready. "And when do you figure this showdown will take place?"

"Not until we come up with the remains of the wagon train," she explained. "We don't want to make our move too soon. Until that time we need Drake and the whole crew for protection against the Indians. But once we reach the place, once I know exactly where the gold is, then will be the time to strike. In the meanwhile you should speak to your friends. Try to enlist what help you can. Let me talk to them."

He looked at her, and his grin was back across his lips. "None of them can resist you, lady."

She matched the grin. "That's what I think. But if you see me talking to them, don't be angry. Remember, we all have to work together. We'll need all the help we can get if we're going to face Bill Drake."

ANDY DRAKE watched Mary Thorne return quietly to the camp. He had been awake for half an hour, but he lay perfectly quiet, his hat shading his face, so it was impossible to tell whether he was asleep or not.

He had seen her rise and walk out of the camp, and had lifted himself on one elbow so that he could observe her conversation with Monte Gordon. He had not been able to hear what was said, but the girl's manner and Gordon's reaction had brought a frown to his eyes.

He waited, however, until other members of the crew stirred. Then he rose, still thinking deeply, and moved down to the

threadlike stream, bathing his face and arms.

The heat of the late afternoon was oppressive, pushing down upon them with the force of a blast from a smoking furnace. He came back to the circle of the camp and stopped to watch the cook who was already busy at the tailboard of the wagon. Then Andy moved out to help bring the horses in and watered them at the small hollow which had been scooped out below the spring.

After they had eaten, the two casks filled and the canteens replenished, they lifted themselves stiffly into the saddles and headed northwestward toward where the mountains rose, purple-shadowed and mysterious in the last rays of the setting sun.

Andy was riding at the head of the column, close to his brother's side, a good fifty feet ahead of the closest followers. The Drakes rode in silence for a good three miles, not forcing their horses, letting them pick their pace and path.

"I see," said Bill finally, "that Monte Gordon is showing interest in your girl."

Andy was startled. It was the first time Bill had spoken since they had broken camp. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"A man," said Bill Drake, "always turns secretive when he gets interested in a woman. I watched you this afternoon. You pretended to be asleep, but you were awake enough to see her talking to Gordon. You let her come back without even admitting to her that you had been watching."

Andy looked at his brother. He had not guessed that Bill had also been awake.

He said, half sullenly, "You told me last night to let you mind your business and that I should mind mine."

"I am minding my business," Bill told him. "A woman when thrown in with a bunch of men is like a keg of dynamite. She can have a worse effect on them than all the gold that will ever be dug in these mountains. Her very existence will cause quarrels and jealousies."

Andy was sullen. "It was you who brought her along. You should have refused the trip and sent her back to Tucson."

"And what about the gold?"

"What about it?" said Andy. He was arguing now for the girl. "What do you mean to do with her, after the gold is found?"

Bill shrugged, studying him. "That is one thing that I haven't decided."

"Play fair with her." Andy had been angry with the girl that afternoon, but now he was pleading her cause. "Give her her share of the gold and let her go back where she came from."

"What makes you think I intend to do anything else?"

Andy hesitated. He realized that he could not explain what he meant without admitting to his brother that both he and Mary Thorne knew of Wakeman's murder.

He said, angrily, trying to cover up, "Because I've watched you for the last few months. What you do you do for Bill Drake and for no one else."

His older brother was genuinely surprised. "And who else would I be doing it for? Listen, kid, you're young and you've had no experience and you're soft. There's no place out here for a man who is soft. You'll have to get that through your head or you won't live long. If I thought you were going soft on me I'd send you riding out of here this afternoon."

Andy shut his lips, realizing that it was fruitless to argue. There was an unreal quality to the whole conversation, to the whole situation. A year before he could not have pictured himself riding across this waste with a crowd of outlaws.

HE STARED at his horse's ears, realizing how very little he actually knew about Bill. There was a seven-year difference in their ages, and Bill had been gone from home almost before Andy's first memory.

Only chance had thrown them together again when Bill had recognized the family resemblance and asked him his name on the street in Tombstone.

And in the three months since he had first ridden with the crew, Bill had seldom spoken of himself, of his experiences or of his desires. He had in effect held Andy at arm's length, treating him as he treated the other riders, keeping his own counsel and showing no curiosity about his brother.

This was the first time they had ever really talked together and the gulf of misunderstanding which separated their points of view loomed wider than Andy had imagined.

Bill endured his silence for half a mile, then he said, "I want an understanding with you now. There's a showdown coming. I can feel it. I can smell it in the air. That girl is going to cause trouble. She's going to tear this crew apart and turn it into a bunch of snarling dogs. When that happens, where do you stand? Are you with me, or have those eyes of hers gotten to you?"

Andy did not answer.

"Let me warn you," said his brother. "I know a lot more about women than you ever will. That's why I let them alone mostly. This girl is a spitfire if I ever saw one. She knows that she's pretty, and she is used to having her own way, and she knows the value of her looks when it comes to dealing with men.

"And she's not one of these wishy-washy females that gets dressed up in silks and laces and faints every time a man frowns at her. She can fight, I'm warning you, and when she fights she will be as deadly as a rattlesnake."

"And what has this to do with me?"

"I don't know," said Bill. "A man in love gets funny ideas. I'm trying to warn you to watch your step. Put her out of your mind if you can. I wish I thought you could. I wish that none of us had ever seen her. I've got a hunch about her. I've got a hunch that the worst mistake I ever made was when I decided to go after her gold.

"But the cards are on the table, the hand is dealt. The only thing we can do is to choose our sides and carry on the best we can." He grinned suddenly. "Make up your mind, Andy. You are either with me or against me. There isn't any place for anyone in between. You've got to stand on one side of the fence or the other."

THE BALD-HEADED cook was named Frank Page, but it had been so long since anyone had called him by his right name that he had almost forgotten it. He had been cooking for a mine crew down below the Border when he'd had a run-in with the foreman and killed a man with a single-jack.

The foreman had been popular and the cook had had to run for his life. He had headed into the wild mountains with no real hope of ever escaping. The mountains were filled with Mexican renegades, broncho Indians and wild animals. He had been unarmed and if he did not fall prey to some of the outlaws, there was a better-than-even chance that he would starve to death.

He had nearly starved, for by the time Bill Drake's men had stumbled across his camp, he had been too weak to run. Most of the crew had been for letting him die, figuring that a man as old and feeble would be worse than useless. But Bill Drake had been in one of his humorous moods and it amused him to question the ragged scarecrow.

"What can you do, Pop?"

His eyes had twinkled both with humor, curiosity and a cold nerve.

Page had glared at him, his old eyes so sunken in his thin face that it was hard to see. "I can cook." He was past caring what they did with him. At first he had assumed that they were a posse of the foreman's friends come out from the mine to hang him.

"Why," said Bill Drake, and chuckled to himself, "we need a cook. There isn't a bunch of brush-jumpers in the Territory that can boast a chuckwagon. We'll get us a wagon and we'll have warm victuals. And maybe we'll take some of the wrinkles out of our bellies."

He had laughed, and the old man had thought that Bill was making fun of him and tried to throw a rock at him, but Bill had taken him north of the Line. He'd bought a wagon and stocked it and they had hauled it over some of the roughest country that a wagon had ever traversed, at times forced to use a dozen saddle lines to help the struggling team.

Frank Page was proud of his wagon. He felt that it was his, and he never allowed one of the other men to crawl in under the canvas-covered bows.

IT WAS past midnight when the cook noticed that Mary Thorne was sagging in her saddle from sheer weariness. He had watched her from the first moment that she'd entered the camp, feeling a faint stirring at the old dried-up place which was his heart.

Somewhere he had a daughter, although he had not seen her in fifty years, but in his mind's eye he pictured her as only a young woman, perhaps resembling this girl. They halted at one o'clock and, while they rested, breathing their horses, he sidled over to where she sat listlessly, her eyes closed, her head drooping forward in half sleep.

"There's room on the wagon seat," he said, "and it's easier than the saddle. You can curl up and sleep."

Mary Thorne opened her dark eyes and peered up at him. There was nothing reassuring in the way he looked. He was old and dry and dirty, a little man with bandy-legs and a ring of brownish-white hair which circled a shining scalp. His eyes were blue, but his squint was so tight that it was hard to see the pupils.

"Why, thank you," she said, and when Bill Drake gave the word to move on, she was perched on the high seat at the cook's side, a blanket folded around her, her horse tied to the tail gate.

"It's a rough country," said the cook. His pipe was short and black and smelled vilely of cheap tobacco. "Only an idiot would ever come into it."

"There's the gold," she said. "What do you plan to do with your share of the gold?"

New life came into the cook's voice. What would he do with his share of the gold? A whole panorama of dreams opened up to fill his old mind.

"Why," he said slowly, "I guess I'll go back."

"Back where?"

"To York State. It's got grass and trees and water a-plenty. I'll go back and build me a house by a stream and listen to the water."

He fell silent, thinking of the water until he could almost hear the sound of it gurgling as it coursed down over the boulders. What a wonderful thing water was. A man never realized how important it was till he came out into a dry country.

And then his dream faded slowly and reality returned. He heard the creak of the wagon, the grind of the iron tires over the tough splintered rock. He knew then that no matter how much gold he found he would not go back. He had made strikes before and the money had lasted only until he'd hit a town, only until he'd reached the first saloon that boasted a poker game or a faro bank.

For the cook was a gambler. He had been a gambler all his life, not the kind of gambler who made a living at cards, but a man obsessed with a desire to play. It was worse than drink, worse than women. It tore a man inside out and left him broke and disillusioned and hopeless.

A dozen times he had sworn off and as many times he had lasted only until there was money in his pocket again. He gripped the smooth lines with his knob-knuckled twisted hands and stared out across the rising swell of the rough country ahead, silvered now by the full light of the moon, and thought bitterly that it would have been better for him if he had never heard of gold, if they never found the lost treasure for which they were seeking.

He turned and looked at the girl, his voice rising so that it carried above the sharp grind of the ungreased wagon wheels.

"Money's a bad thing," he said. "Men fight for it and kill for it and die for it. And after they get it into their hands, what good has it ever done them? You lose it at the first gambling table or drink it up at the first bar. What does a girl like you want with gold?"

SHE TURNED her head. She started to tell him that she needed it to save the ranch, to pay her father's doctor bills, and then she checked herself. What good was it to explain? What difference would it make if this funny little old man understood?

She said, "I want it. Isn't that enough?"

His laughter had a cackling sound that held little mirth. "The world," he said, "is

full of people who want things. It's this want that sends men to the mountains, into the deserts and to hell itself, and they never find what they want. Why don't you forget about the gold and go back where you came from? You don't belong in this country. No woman belongs out here. Get out while you can."

"But I can't go." She spoke without thinking. "Bill Drake wouldn't let me go if I wanted to."

The cook squinted at her in the darkness. To him Bill Drake was one of the greatest men in the world. Of all the assorted crew who rode behind the outlaw, he had the deepest feeling of loyalty. Drake had picked him up when he was starving. Drake had gotten him the chuckwagon and prevented the other outlaws from hazing him. In his simple existence, that was enough to make him Drake's man for life.

"You don't know Bill Drake," he told her. "A lot of men call Bill Drake names, but not one of them is good enough to clean his boots."

Mary Thorne was genuinely shocked. She recognized the note of simplicity in the man's voice.

"It's you who don't know him," she said. "The man's a murderer. Why—why, he killed Mr. Wakeman last night—" As soon as she had spoken she bit her lip, fearful that the cook would carry the words back to Drake.

But the cook was not even surprised. For his own protection he made it a practice to know everything that went on around the camp, and he had helped bury the lawyer's body, heaping stones upon the grave so that no coyotes could possibly unearth it.

He had felt no shock at Wakeman's death and no curiosity as to why Bill Drake had killed the lawyer. The mere fact that Drake had fired the shots were enough for him.

"Wakeman was a dog," he said. "Wakeman would have robbed his own grandmother. What are you worrying about Wakeman for?"

Mary Thorne was scared. She had certainly not meant to let the cook know that she suspected Drake of the murder and she said now in a small voice, "Don't tell Bill Drake that I know he killed Wakeman. Please don't."

The cook was surprised. "Tell who? Shucks, don't worry about that. He don't care what you know, or what you think you know."

"He does," she insisted. "He'd—he'd kill me to keep me quiet."

The cook started to laugh. "Why, girl, you're crazy. Bill Drake wouldn't kill a woman. Bill Drake doesn't need to. He isn't afraid of anybody."

IN EVERY crew there was a Kid, and Bill Drake's outfit was no different from the rest. Sometimes the nickname was used for the youngest rider of the crowd. At others it was held by a man who had possessed it in his youth.

The Pecos Kid was young, twenty-one or two. He did not know how old he was. His mother had been an army washerwoman. The Kid had never known the name of his father. He had been born at Fort Smith on the Arkansas and run away at nine, drifting westward during the troubled period which followed the Civil War.

Where he had picked up the nickname, only he knew, and he had never troubled to tell. He was narrow-faced, tight-lipped, looking a good ten years older than his actual age. His body was thin, wiry with the resilience of rawhide, and he never seemed to tire.

He rode easily at Monte Gordon's side, steadily, without speaking, as the night lightened and turned gradually into dawn. Gordon studied him from the corner of his eye. All during the hours of darkness he had been considering the Kid, for his shifty mind was already forming a plan.

This plan was born as a direct result of his talk with Mary Thorne. He found that he could not get the girl out of his mind. He found that the more he thought about her the more angry he became with Bill Drake. But he was still afraid of Drake, and the Kid was the most dangerous man in the crew.

"Long ride," Gordon said, and stretched himself in the saddle.

The Kid glanced at him, then away. His

slight body was so thin that it did not look strong enough to support the two heavy low-slung guns that swung at his flat hips.

"And for what?" The Kid's words had a certain bitterness.

"For gold," said Gordon. "You don't mean to tell me that you have no interest in gold?"

The Pecos Kid spat in the reddish dust. "I like gold as well as the next." His voice was a rasping whine. "But, hell, who knows that there's any gold at the end of this fool trip? Who knows that the girl didn't draw that map herself?"

"Why should she?"

"Why's a woman do anything?" The Kid was very bitter about women. A girl in El Paso del Norte had turned him over to the sheriff and he had not trusted any of them since.

Gordon, who knew the story, laughed, then sobered. "The gold will be there all right. Bill Drake didn't bother to shoot that lawyer, Wakeman, without feeling certain that there was enough gold involved to be worth a killing. Bill's no fool."

The Kid grumbled. "He may not be a fool, but at times he acts like one."

Gordon nodded to himself. The Kid had felt the rough edge of Bill's tongue more than once. "Drake sets himself up pretty big," Gordon admitted.

"He's not so big." The Kid was nursing past and fancied wrongs. "A rifle bullet would knock him out of that saddle. The next time he lights into me he'd better look out."

Gordon said idly, "Why wait until he lights into you?"

THE PECOS KID turned then, giving the man at his side a long, slow, calculating look. At last he said, "What are you trying to get at?"

His eyes were blue, but so light that it was hard to see any pattern in them. It gave his face a peculiar effect, as if his head were only a skull with empty sockets.

Gordon shivered, looking hastily away. "There's supposed to be two hundred pounds of gold," he said. "How much do you think we'll ever see of it?"

"We'll see our share."

"Will we?"

"We'd better," said the Kid, and let his left hand drop to the butt of his gun. "There'll be trouble if we don't. I never knew Drake to hold out, anyway."

"He killed Wakeman," Gordon said. "He killed him because the lawyer wanted half. There are fifteen of us. Bill Drake isn't going to like having to split that gold fifteen ways."

The Pecos Kid thought this over slowly. "So?"

"So maybe some of us should take over. Burns will do what I say, and Snyder and Tex Hart—that makes five of us. Five of us working together should be enough."

"But we don't know where the gold is."

Gordon laughed. "No, we don't know where the gold is, but the girl does. She's a friend of mine, and she's afraid of Drake."

The Kid ran the tip of his tongue over his dust-covered lips. "A friend of yours?"

Gordon's laugh was self-conscious. "I've kind of got a way with women."

The Kid looked at him. "You think you've got a way with women."

"Well, I have," said Gordon, and sounded almost hurt. "I didn't even go after her. She came to me. I tell you, she's afraid of Drake. She'll do almost anything to escape from Drake."

"Oh, she will?" said the Kid. "And who gets her after we've found the gold?"

Gordon already had his own plans for this, but he managed to say lightly, "That's easy, Kid. We'll cut cards, and may the best man win."

"All right," said the Pecos Kid, "you can count me in."

GORDON nodded. He was more than satisfied as he reined his horse back until Tex Hart and Butch Snyder pulled abreast. They were as nearly real friends as he had within the crew.

Hart was big, broad of shoulder and almost middle-aged. Gossip said that he had been an officer in the Southern army, but Gordon knew that this was not true. What little fighting Hart had done had been in the Guerrilla raids along the Missouri bor-

der. From there he had fled into Kansas and south into Texas.

Butch Snyder was a little man and no one knew what he had done or where he had come from.

With them, Gordon was more open, outlining his plan in greater detail. "Bill Drake thinks he's the top man," he said sourly, "but if he didn't have the crew with him where would he be?"

Neither troubled to answer him and he went on, telling them about the girl's fear of Drake, about his certainty that they would not receive a fair division of the gold.

"The Pecos Kid is with us," he added, "and if any man in the bunch can match Drake with a sixgun it's the Pecos Kid."

"And what if Drake kills the Kid?" It was Tex Hart who asked.

"So he kills him." Gordon's voice was full of indifference. "We'll fix things up so that the Kid braces Drake. After Drake is down we'll take control."

"What about the younger brother?"

Gordon looked ahead toward where Andy was still riding at the head of the column. "I'll take care of him myself," Gordon promised. "I don't like him anyway."

They nodded, riding ahead in silence, each man wrapped deeply in his own thoughts. Before them, some sixty or seventy miles distant, the mountain began to take shape in the soft, early morning light.

At that distance there was nothing very mysterious about the rising peak, nothing at all frightening. It seemed just another upthrust from the barren soil.

They rode onward, steadily, wearily, yet at a pace which did not beat out their horses, and it was almost ten o'clock before Bill Drake raised his hand, and the cook swung the chuckwagon into the mouth of a shallow ravine where a seepage of water offered a little moisture and the steep sides some shelter from the blazing sun.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. In Southwestern Texas, immigrant laborers from Mexico are called which of the following: bravos, buscaderos, bosqueros or braceros?

2. What color cattle do movie star Greer Garson and her husband Buddy Fogelson raise on their ranch near Pecos, N. M.?

3. Stringhalt, a cramped muscle condition causing a jerky gait in horses, affects chiefly the front or hind legs?

4. What color are the trumpet-like blossoms of the ocotillo or thorny coach-whip of the Southwestern deserts?

5. Before game laws, when an old-timer wanted venison during the deer's mating season, he always shot a doe or very young buck. Why?

6. What state boasts of the grandeur of its Wind River Glaciers, said to be the largest ice fields in the U. S.?

7. I heard a cowboy say: "Otherwise he's a purty good horse, but he sure falls out of bed." What did he mean?

8. Most of you have read Mark Twain's "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." In what state, if any, is Calaveras County?

9. Which rarely stretches out full length on the ground when lying down, a horse or a cow?

10. Although cowpunching certainly is work, few cowboys ever say they "work" for a certain ranch. What word do they use instead?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 145. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

CAPTAIN BOB couldn't come himself, so he sent a steward to the boarding-house to fetch Ellen and her mother aboard the *Missouri Queen*.

The steward was only a small man, but he could carry a miraculous double-armload of suitcases. Ellen and her mother followed him down Fort Benton's muddy streets to the wharf, where the *Queen* rested in splendor, gleaming with gilt and fresh paint.

He led them through main deck freight, and up to a boilerdeck companionway, spruce with prismed chandeliers and a spotless Norwegian rug and varnished doors. He deposited the suitcases there and ushered them with a spine-cracking bow into a magnificent stateroom with a gorgeous canopied bed, a cherrywood vanity, mirrors everywhere.

Ellen's mother sat on the bed, toed off her shoes and began to cry again.

Ellen laid a silver dime in the steward's palm, dismissing him. Then she turned to her mother accusingly.

"Now, Ma. You promised."

Her mother dabbed her eyes with a ridiculous bit of a Sunday handkerchief. Her mother's hands and feet were tiny, but the rest of her was pleasingly plump, and a little extra.

"My lamb," her mother moaned. "My poor, sacrificial lamb!"

Ellen said, "Oh, poo! Don't be ridiculous. Smile for me."

Her mother wiped away a tear and tried a chubby smile. Ellen's mother was

EVERYTHING WAS FINE in Ellen's wedding plans . . . till she met a man she could love

STEAMBOAT

chubby because she was a nibbler. There remained one picture in Ellen's mind of her earliest girlhood—her mother standing before the big wood range in the Dakota ranch house, baking dried apple pies and nibbling.

"But, honey." The smile died a slow death, and her mother sniffled. "I said it before and I say it again. You don't love him."

Ellen said, "He's rich. He's not so bad looking in his uniform."

Her mother said, "I never thought to see the day. A daughter of mine, marrying for money."

She saw what happened as something in a nightmare

CINDERELLA

By Clark Gray

Ellen sighed. She took off her hat and crossed lithely to one of the mirrors. She unpinned her yellow hair and let it fall to her waist and began to comb it for the dressy style Bob liked.

Studying herself, she found that her cheeks had the same healthy outdoor pink; her eyes were the same blue. She tried her smile and it was the same—provocative, girlish. You don't look different, she thought. Then her mother sniffled again, back on the bed, and Ellen blinked and saw herself suddenly, bleakly, as a stranger.

Marrying for money, she told the strange image silently. But why? So your ma

needn't slave over a stove any more. Is that the real reason?

She slipped a handful of hairpins into her mouth and arranged her yellow hair and told herself not to be a silly now. Think about the wedding, she commanded herself, and her mind swung immediately into obedience, and she visualized a touch of pink.

She must remember to get a touch of pink into her bridal outfit, she thought, to set off her complexion. And for the silver, there was no harm in an expensive set. Bob could afford St. Louis's best. And a neat, tight little house for her mother. She would insist on that.

Her mother hadn't had a home in years, not since the bad time when Ellen's father had gotten gold fever and brought them to Montana, and then died of consumption. It'd been a succession of boardinghouses, then and later, with Ellen singing in the Last Chance Saloon and her mother perspiring and nibbling in the saloon's kitchen.

Ellen's fingers worked deftly. She'd emptied her mouth of hairpins and was fastening a blue ribbon into thick yellow curls when a knock sounded on the cabin door.

"Pet," Bob's voice said, "can I come in?"

HE CAME striding in with a captain's lordly gait, flanked by two stewards bearing gifts of fruit and flowers. He was a big, bluff man in a blue coat with gold piping. No matter how he shaved, his chin was always a manly, whiskered blue-black. He had very white teeth. Mostly he wore a leather-visored officer's cap. But now he carried the cap under his elbow, and his little bald spot gleamed discreetly.

He clasped her in his arms and said, "Ellen, my sweet."

Ellen did her duty. She kissed him delicately, aware of the stewards and her mother. He smelled of Cuban tobacco and good Kentucky bourbon and Pennsylvania coal smoke.

"Here, boys," he commanded the stewards. "On the table."

The stewards had already placed the fruit and flowers on the mahogany table. Now two heads bowed low, two faces smiled, four eyes rolled curiously toward Ellen. Then the stewards backed respectfully from the cabin.

Bob smiled fondly at her. "Like the cabin? I redecorated it especially for you, last month in St. Louis."

Ellen said sincerely, "It's beautiful, Bob," and took his hand and led him to her mother, who was frantically stuffing her feet into her shoes.

"Ma," she said, "here he is at last."

Her mother stood up, winced, wiggled her foot, and extended a tiny hand.

"Hello, Bob Jackson. Many's the time I cooked your supper, but I never saw the man that ate it."

Bob's smile now was winning, gallant, boyish. He was only fourteen years older than Ellen.

"I went to the Last Chance," he said, "to hear Ellen sing, always. I didn't know you worked there, too, Mrs. Eidermann. Afraid I didn't pay much attention to the food. Young love's bright dream, y'know."

Ellen's mother said, "Steak and eggs. You're one of them mean, ornery kind, ain't you, Bob Jackson? Steak and egg men mostly are. My husband was a steak and egg man. He caught three cattle thieves once, hung 'em before you could say boo. Another time—"

Ellen said quickly, "Ma, Bob'll want to show us his boat, I reckon. You want to come?"

Her mother looked at her curiously, then sighed. "You two go ahead. I ain't got my fill of setting yet. Them's good-looking apples, too."

And so, ten minutes later, alone at last in the boat office, Ellen put on her most gracious, most loving smile. She let Bob give her her first real, proprietary kiss.

As always, Bob's kiss was gentlemanly. He was prim and proper about the whole thing. Ellen received the kiss gravely, taking no thrill and expecting none. When it was done she stepped back and studied him, wondering again if there were no honest passion in him anywhere.

"My pet," he said. "My little jewel."

Ellen said, "Bob—"

"Yes, sweet?"

SHE SAT on the red-and-gold sofa and saw him intuitively, as he would look across a breakfast table, as he would look ten years from now, twenty. Already his jaws showed signs of fatty tissue, and the shiny bald spot had grown a little, just since she'd known him.

He had a square, stubborn mouth, and his gray eyes were always certain, always a little cool, as if the world they looked on were neatly cubbyholed and somewhat despicable. Ellen felt a little crystal of ice swelling in her heart.

She said, "Bob, I'm scared."

He smiled adoringly now. "Of what, pet?"

"I don't know. Bob, do you love me?"

"I love you, and I need you," he said. "Ellen, it's a lonely climb up the ladder of success."

His chin squared. His eyes became faraway. He looked like a picture Ellen had once seen of Julius Caesar. He sighed with a touch of world-weariness. Then he smiled again.

"Besides," he said, "a man in my position needs a beauteous creature by his side. Social asset, you know."

"I suppose," Ellen said. "Bob, I want you to know how much I appreciate your taking care of mother this way, promising her a home and everything. She's always worked so hard—"

He waved a beefy, manicured hand. "Don't think of it, pet. You'll find me generous to a fault. But then, I can afford it."

"It'll be terribly expensive, keeping two houses."

He said, "Not for me."

He stood up and looked at her a moment thoughtfully. His eyes began to brighten, and Ellen was reminded of a small boy bursting with eagerness.

"Look," he said, "I didn't apologize for not meeting you. But you'll understand when I show you—"

He beckoned. Wondering, she rose and followed him to an inner room. He closed the door carefully and locked it, and Ellen found herself staring at a great, green steel wall with a combination lock. Bob twisted the lock and swung the thick wall to one side on oiled hinges.

"This," he said, "is why I can afford to pamper you, pet. I've a right to my pride, I believe."

Ellen saw a row of yellow wooden shelves. Each shelf was stacked with little canvas stacks, a dozen high, tightly stuffed, like white sausages. "Bob! What is it?"

His eyes shone. "Gold," he whispered. "Over a million dollars' worth, from the mines, bound for St. Louis. I had this bank vault especially installed, only one like it on the river. I get all the gold business. It pays better'n anything else."

Ellen's lips made an O, and she looked at the sacks with awe. "But aren't you afraid of being robbed, or the boat sinking or something?"

He smiled with those gleaming eyes. Watching, Ellen knew now that he did have an honest passion, after all. "I'm a better businessman than that. It's all insured, angel."

She thrust out a cautious finger and touched a sack. "Can I open one?"

"No." He was suddenly curt. "You might spill some of the dust. Step back."

Ellen stepped back, and he slammed the door. Something in his face was unreadable.

"Come on," he said quietly, "I'll show you the rest of the boat."

THE REST of the boat was as magnificent as Ellen's cabin. From bow to stern, from larboard to starboard, from keel to texas, she followed Bob through the smell of varnish, through spic-and-span cleanliness, through gilt and glitter and deep rugs and waxed mahogany. And everywhere the deck hands and the stewards stepped aside courteously and bowed and removed their hats.

They all "sirred" Bob; they were always anxious to leap at the slightest, negligent wave of his hand. Until at last Ellen began to wonder if the crew wasn't overdoing it a little, if there wasn't some element of apple-polishing here, if perhaps something in Bob's character demanded bootlicking.

She found the answer to that in the pilot-

house. The pilothouse was a gleaming place of sunlight and gold, with its gorgeous inlaid wheel, high as Ellen's head, with a tremendous expanse of clear glass, with oilcloth on the floor and brass spittoons and a crimson leather sofa, on which lounged a leggy, patched, blue-clad man with flaming red hair.

"Mr. McCann," Bob greeted sternly. "If you please, sir. I have a guest."

The red-headed man yawned. He laid aside a paper which read, *Pilot's Association River Report.* He was incredibly freckled, and he didn't seem to care about anything. He looked at Ellen, blinked, grinned. He laced fingers behind his head and lolled back contentedly.

"So I see, Jackson. So I see."

Bob scowled. "*Captain* Jackson, if you please. I've warned you about informality, Mr. McCann. Now, if you'll present your compliments to the lady—"

The redhead winked at Ellen. "You mean stand up? Sorry, Jackson. I'm tired."

Ellen heard Bob's gasp, and just in time she throttled an impulse to giggle. The back of Bob's neck glowed red over his collar.

"Mr. McCann," Bob said icily. "As your captain, I require for my fiancée the same courtesies that—"

"Fiancée?" the redhead said. "You mean—" He stood up then, stuffing his river report into his hip pocket. He turned bold blue eyes on Ellen.

"Honey," he said, "You going to marry this bald-headed old man?"

Ellen bit her lip. She glanced at Bob and saw his cheeks slowly growing purple. She said, "I am. And he's not old, Mister whatever's-your-name."

"McCann," McCann said. "Red McCann. And he's 'most old enough to be your pappy. A stuffed shirt, too. You don't want to marry a stuffed shirt, do you, honey?"

"If Bob is," Ellen said loyally, "I do. You better shut your trap, Red. You're about to get fired."

Red McCann shrugged. "I'm an Association pilot. He can't fire me, and he knows it. But look, honey. If you really love this stuffed shirt, maybe I better apologize for my manners."

BOB JACKSON found his voice then. It was shaky with rage. "Maybe you better, Mr. McCann. If you expect to keep your license—"

"All right," Red McCann said cheerfully. "I'll start over."

He flipped his river report from his hip pocket and dropped back to his elbow on the sofa. His freckled face took on a look of concentration as he scanned the report. He peered at Ellen over the paper.

"I'm reading," he said. "Just before you come in." He paused, read two or three lines, his lips moving. "Now you're in here," he said.

He jumped to his feet and stood stiffly, a parody of a soldier at attention.

He spoke from the side of his mouth. "Now, Jackson. Introduce me proper."

Bob's face was turkey red. But he said sullenly, "Miss Eidermann, Mr. McCann. Mr. McCann, my fiancée, Miss Eidermann."

Red McCann bowed, solemn as an Englishman. He reached a lank, freckled hand to Ellen's. He lifted her fingers to his lips. He kissed the back of her hand, then turned it over and kissed her palm. Then he kissed her wrist. Ellen shivered.

"Miss Eidermann," Red said with dignity. "Chawmed."

Ellen said, "Thank you."

Red said, "'T'ain't nothing. I charm easy."

Ellen snickered. She couldn't help it. This Red McCann was one of those devil-may-care kind; she'd known dozens of them at the Last Chance. The gay young grasshoppers of the world, who gave no thought of tomorrow, who sang in the sun and were happy.

They were lovable creatures, but it was the workaday ants who lived through the cold winters. Ellen pictured Bob Jackson as an ant, with antennae where his ears belonged, and unexpectedly she snickered again.

"What's so funny?" Bob's voice grated.

"Ellen, if this display of vulgarity amuses you—"

"No, Bob," Ellen said. "I was thinking of you."

"Of me? You laughed at me?"

"As an ant," she said. "As if you were an ant, Bob."

"An ant!" His black eyebrows lifted and his chin squared and he put his glare on her. "Ellen, this frivolity—"

"But you see," Ellen explained, a little scared now, "you're an ant, like Red, here, is a grasshopper. He *is* a grasshopper, you know. Or kind of. He—"

"Ellen," Bob interrupted with a severe look, a bossy, captainy kind of look. "I can't have my discipline made a plaything of. You'd better go to your stateroom. You're tired and excited and perhaps not yourself."

Ellen said, "I'm all right," but she put a hand to her throat and stared at Bob, seeing the black line of his brows, the pinched tightness of his mouth, and suddenly she wasn't all right at all.

She said in a queer, high, frightened little voice, "Bob—"

"I am master on this boat," he said. "Go to your room."

Ellen found herself looking at Red McCann. He had half turned to the pilot's wheel. His jaw was white, and the freckles along that bony ridge looked oddly orange. Then Ellen stared squarely at Bob, and he was red. A blood vessel pulsed under his ear.

"All right, Bob," she said. "I'm—" She swallowed hard and choked it out. "I'm sorry."

SHE WASN'T sorry, really, but she'd promised to marry Bob. She'd made a deal, now she had to see it through. She walked down through the silent texas to the boilerdeck cabin with her lower lip pinched hard between her teeth, biting back unshed tears, fighting to make it to the cabin before the flood came.

She made it, but when she opened the cabin door she saw her mother comfortably propped on pillows in an easy chair, eating an apple. Her mother's plump, surprised face turned toward her, and Ellen saw with a kind of blank horror that even here she couldn't cry. Because her mother would say, I told you so.

So she didn't cry. She throttled her tears, put on a cold, brittle mask. She washed her face and took her mother for a stroll around the boilerdeck. For a while they stood on the rail, watching passengers stream aboard for the trip down-river. And then the supper gong rang, and Ellen led her mother to the dining salon with iron around her heart.

She had just learned a lesson, she decided. You don't have to cry. You can freeze your pain inside you, and presently it numbs you and you feel nothing, neither good nor bad.

That was the way she went through supper. Ellen and her mother had places of honor at the captain's table, but Captain Bob was busy, it turned out, supervising

Cowgal's Complaint

Said a cowgal quite little but lissom:
"I like buckaroos and I'd kiss 'em,
But oh me, oh my,
Besides being shy,
They're all so darn tall that I miss 'em!"

—Limerick Luke

cargo stowage. A blond young first mate took Bob's place, but Ellen paid no attention to the mate, or to Red McCann. Red sat beside Ellen's mother, and in that iron daze, Ellen heard him oozing charm.

"Why, ma'am," Ellen heard him say, "No wonder your daughter's a beauty. Look what she had for a start." Red grinned. "Tell it true now. You was a whizzer with the men, twenty years ago. Wasn't you?"

Ellen's mother giggled insanely, and Ellen felt her insides curl in shame at this, and suddenly she hated Red McCann and Bob and all men. She asked for the salt in a short, snappy voice that made the young first mate flinch as if she'd hit him.

WHEN DUSK came, the *Missouri Queen* gave a mighty blast of her whistle, pulled up her gangplank and splashed away from the wharf, St. Louis bound.

Ellen stood alone at the rail with a ghostly half moon swinging before her eyes, and at last, in semi-dark privacy, she opened the gates and let the tears come silently.

It was wonderful to cry. The tears had just begun to stream well down her chin, and Ellen had just begun to get that heart-lightening, that softening effect of a good bawl, when a voice said, "Aw, honey. It ain't that bad."

She gulped a lungful of air. She didn't turn. She fumbled for a handkerchief and buried her face. Red McCann's gentle fingers touched her shoulder and turned her. She shrugged him off savagely.

"Go steer the boat," she said.

He grinned. She couldn't see it, but she knew it, somehow. He said, "I don't go on duty till midnight. Honey, if it's that bad, why don't you ditch him?"

She said, "He's rich," before she thought. And then she stuck her tongue between her teeth and wanted to bite it off.

But Red McCann only chuckled. "So'm I."

She said, "You're lying. Your britches are patched."

"I'm rich, though. In the things that count."

She said, "Go way."

He shook his head, and the *Queen* swung into her channel, bringing that pale moon behind him. His head was black against it. He had a brooding, tender look.

He said, "I'll show you."

Long hands clasped her shoulders. She felt herself turned from the rail. Her body slid forward and against him, and he was all leanness and a hard flat chest, and his hands cupped around her shoulder blades.

He said softly, "Hold still," and his black head moved large, blotting out the moon. His breath swept past her mouth like the stirred air from a butterfly's wing. Then his lips touched hers the way a butterfly touches a flower.

It was his gentleness that did it. He was just an ordinary kisser otherwise; his lips were thin, and he was not really an expert.

But the gentleness of it touched off a tiny chain of firecrackers in Ellen. Little explosions ran down her spine, and her breath whooshed from her lungs, and suddenly she slipped her hand under Red's arms and put them on his lean ribs and held on tight.

Then he released her, and moonlight flashed into her eyes. She blinked and said, "Ladyfingers."

Red said, "Huh!"

"Ladyfingers," Ellen said. "That's a kind of firecracker. Look here, Red. You get away from me."

He grinned. "Why?"

"Cause I'm scared," she said. "I'm a spoken-for woman. It ain't proper—"

"You could get unspoke."

She shook her head. "Not me. I've got my life all planned, and you aren't any part of it. Go up and steer the boat, Red."

Red looked at her, and the moonlight behind him shone through his hair in a reddish halo. Ellen's heart flip-flopped, and her tricky imagination pictured a knight. A haloed knight in shining armor.

"Please Red," she said, "go take your armor off."

He said, "Honey, you're crazy. But I love you."

She moaned. "I'll hit you with a stick. You'll bong like an engine bell."

Red said, "Listen here, you ain't going to marry Jackson till St. Louis, are you? Give me a chance, honey. Just give me five minutes a day. Please. Meet me here every day at dark. If you still want to marry Jackson when we get to St. Louis, I won't say a word. What about it, honey?"

Ellen said, "It won't work. I'm going to marry Bob."

"Will you meet me? Just five minutes a day?"

Ellen said, "If I do—will you kiss me again?"

His voice had a stubborn note. "Why not? You won't melt from it."

Ellen said, "You're right, Sir Red. Well, why the devil not?"

AND SO she did it. The *Missouri Queen* dropped down past the Montana line, past Dog Paw and Towhead Island and the Devil's Bend, past Omaha and Westport. As they traveled southward through a disappearing August, each day became a little shorter, a little warmer. Mosquitoes zoomed about her ears on deck at nights now; once, oddly, a seagull circled overhead. And each turn of the big side-wheel paddles brought Ellen closer to her fate.

Evenings, she met Red McCann on the boilerdeck and stood in his arms and kissed him. She told herself it was a last fling, that it didn't mean anything, that it only proved her love for Bob. But this was ridiculous, and one night she admitted it.

She said, "Dang you, Red, let's quit this. It isn't fair to Bob. I should never've promised—"

He said gruffly, with his hands on her waist, "To hell with Jackson. He don't deserve you, honey."

She searched his starlit, freckled face. "You hate him. You always have, from the very first."

"Yes," he nodded. "Ellen, you've seen how the stewards lick his boots. You don't suppose they like to do it, do you?"

She had no answer for that, or for a lot of other things nowadays. Like the way Bob was. After that first meeting with Red McCann, Bob had become nervous, busy, surly. He seemed to have no time for her. He was a strangely lackadaisical lover.

Most of his day was spent in the boat office, or prowling around the freight on the maindeck. Ellen wondered if he knew about her kissing sessions with Red McCann. He never mentioned them, but it was possible, of course. One day, feeling a sudden need for honesty, she went below to ask him point blank.

She found him in the dark recesses of the *Missouri Queen's* cargo hold, a strange awesome place jammed with black, ghostly freight, a place that terrified her unreasonably, with its damp floodboards and the sound of water rushing past her ears.

She threaded through the cargo toward the light that was Bob, and when she reached him, she stopped short in the darkness and put her hand to her mouth in amazement.

He was on hands and knees in a circle of lantern light. An ax glittered in his fingers. He was holding the axhead in his hands, chipping at the heavy timbers of the hull.

She said, "Bob!" and her voice echoed with a watery resonance, and he sprang to his feet, his face abruptly pale as river foam. His knuckles on the ax were white and bony.

"Ellen!" He peered into the darkness. "What're you doing here? Come out."

She came out, with her knees shaking. She stood and watched him, watched the thin, tight line of his mouth. He stalked forward and took her wrist in clawed fingers.

"Spying on me," he said. "Ellen, even you?"

She jerked her wrist away and felt angry fire come into her eyes.

"Stop it, Bob. The world's not against you."

He watched her a moment, his eyes black and gleaming in the lantern light. Then he sighed. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, and his voice became reasonable.

"No, of course. Ellen, I'm sorry. I've been—wrought up. The responsibility, you know."

Ellen said, "Sure, Bob. It's all right. Only—"

"You're lonesome," he said. "I know. I understand, pet."

He kissed her, then, one of those gentlemanly kisses, a pure and innocent thing, antiseptic and lifeless. He smiled.

"Sweet," he said, "I was just checking the hull for dry-rot. You understand, don't you? Just checking." He tossed the ax aside, lifted down the lantern and passed her arm through his. "Come on. Tonight, I want to dance with my beloved."

HE DID dance with her that night. He was heavily handsome in a starched blue coat. He swung her to the fiddle music and remembered his manners and smiled at everybody, even Red McCann, who came down from the pilothouse long enough to fling a heel with Ellen's mother.

Ellen's mother giggled about that in the ladies' salon during intermission.

"That Red," she said, "he ain't no steak and egg eater, like your Cap'n Bob. He's a soup and vegetable man—I asked him. But he's got his ways, Ellen." Her mother got pink-faced and simpered like an idiot. "If I were twenty years younger—"

Ellen said, "Oh, Ma. That fool! I hate him."

Her mother peered at her steadily. "Baby," she said, "now that's a funny thing. I seen you kissing him, t'other night. And yet you hate him. If you ask me, Red's a better catch than that old—"

Ellen said, "Now that's enough," and rammed a pin crookedly into her yellow mane and flounced out into the dance hall again as music lifted sweetly to the chandeliers.

For a few moments she stood watching the gaily dressed crowd, half waiting for Bob to come forward and claim her for the next dance. When he didn't come, she became slowly aware of an intuition within her, a nagging feel of something wrong.

She stood against the wall and let her eyes wander over the dancing, laughing crowd. Bob's absence puzzled her. Perhaps some urgent business. . . .

On a hunch, she turned silently and threaded through the crowd to the door. She stepped out into the darkness of the boilerdeck.

Cool river air struck her face as she moved away from the door. She didn't advance to the rail. For some reason unknown to herself, she hugged the wall, staying within the overhanging darkness of the texas.

An instant later she was glad she had, for feet clattered on the maindeck stairway, and a figure climbed into black silhouette against the stars. She recognized Bob's heavy shoulders instantly, and she shrank deeper into shadow.

He stood a moment there, his head pivoting. Ellen could imagine cold eyes searching the darkness. Then Bob wheeled and went up the stairway to the texas with a cat's agility.

Ellen didn't want to do it, but something forced her. She followed.

She reached the texas just in time to see the black figure heave across the top of the ladder that led to the pilothouse. She gritted her teeth and grasped the ladder rungs.

THE PILOTHOUSE was dark, as always at night. But here on the very top of the boat, moonlight was a silver plating on the world. The river rippled white under it. Off on the bank, the trees were a greenish gray. And directly before Ellen, the glass of the pilothouse sparked dully. A voice drifted to her.

"Shut her down, I say. We've sprung a hole big as a washtub."

It was Bob's voice, hoarse with urgency.

Fear clawed Ellen's heart. She had a moment's horrid vision of the *Queen* sinking, of her decks awash and her smokestacks toppling, of screams and trapped, drowning people. Then the vision vanished, and she crept to the opened pilothouse door.

"Listen," Red McCann's voice came from the big wheel. "Three Cat Island is only round the next bend. I can ground her."

"No!" Bob was almost howling as Ellen slipped through the door. "We've got to lower lifeboats. Can't do that till you stop her dead."

Ellen could see them both, grotesque black figures, half shadow, half silhouette.

Red McCann said, "But man, I can save the passengers. The boat, too."

"Blast you, McCann, who's the captain of this boat? I order you, damn it! Ring up that engineer."

Red said, "There's something wrong about this. That hole, now. Big as a washtub, you say. How'd it get there?"

Ellen spoke, then. She said, "He chopped it. With an ax. . . ."

Because it was dark, Ellen saw what happened next only vaguely, as something impossible, as a nightmare.

First, Captain Bob Jackson bent over and both hands went to his chest. Second, Red McCann spun away from the pilot's wheel, and a wooden hand grip had come unscrewed from the wheel and was in Red's fist. Third, a gunbarrel flashed, and the two men were clinched, and wood whacked bone. Fourth, Captain Bob Jackson groaned and collapsed quietly on his face.

The pilothouse spun and Ellen's bones went to water. Red McCann's hands pushed her gently to the maroon sofa. Then Red was barking urgently through the engine room speaking tube, and bells jangled.

Suddenly the *Missouri Queen* bucked like a pitching horse. Women's voices lifted shrilly. The boat seemed to be plowing through some obstruction. The floor tilted, and suddenly the engines were stilled.

Red McCann said quietly, "It's done. We're safe now."

Ellen never quite fainted. She saw lights, and she heard her mother's voice, calm now, as her mother was always calm in an emergency. Strong arms lifted her, and she knew that this was Red McCann.

Then she was in bed, and a bearded stranger whom her mother called Doctor Simpkins was handing her a glass. "Drink," he said.

Ellen drank and closed her eyes.

And then, miraculously, it was morning. Her mother was shaking her shoulder. "Wake up," she said. "How do you feel?"

Ellen said, "Wonderful," and stretched.

There was a little lazy sweetness in all her muscles, and she was hungry.

"Oh, Ma," she said, and tears came to her eyes. "I won't have to marry him now."

Ten minutes later, Red McCann entered. He hadn't shaved; little orange whiskers sprinkled his jaw. But he was smiling.

"Hi, honey. Wanted to show you something." He held out one of the little canvas sacks Ellen had seen in the bank vault.

Ellen tightened her robe about her. She felt her eyes widen. "Bob's gold!"

"Uh-huh." Red said. "Open it."

Hesitantly Ellen took the fat little sack and fiddled with the drawstring. It popped open presently, and tiny, gritty grains poured across her fingers. She stared.

"It isn't gold. It's—why, it's sand!"

Red McCann nodded grimly. "I been up all night, fetching a lawman and getting that safe open. It was an insurance deal, honey. The real gold's still back in Montana. Jackson aimed to sink the boat and let the insurance company pay the mine owners for the loss. Then he'd have the real gold for himself. An old scheme—"

Ellen sat on the bed and took a moment to digest the shock of that. She thought of Bob, poor Bob, and his vanity, and how he made his servants leap to his slightest whim. She said, "Poor Bob. He wanted money too much."

Red McCann cocked a reddish eyebrow at her. "Uh-huh. It's an ordinary failin'."

Ellen blushed. "All right," she said. "Dang you, Red. I learned my lesson."

"Did you?"

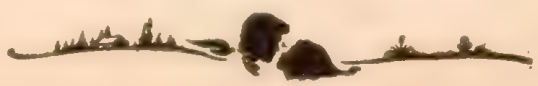
He came to her and pulled her to her feet. He wrapped lean arms around her shoulders. Ellen knew the kiss was coming, right there in front of her mother, and she didn't care at all.

She said, "How much money does a knight in armor make, Sir Red?"

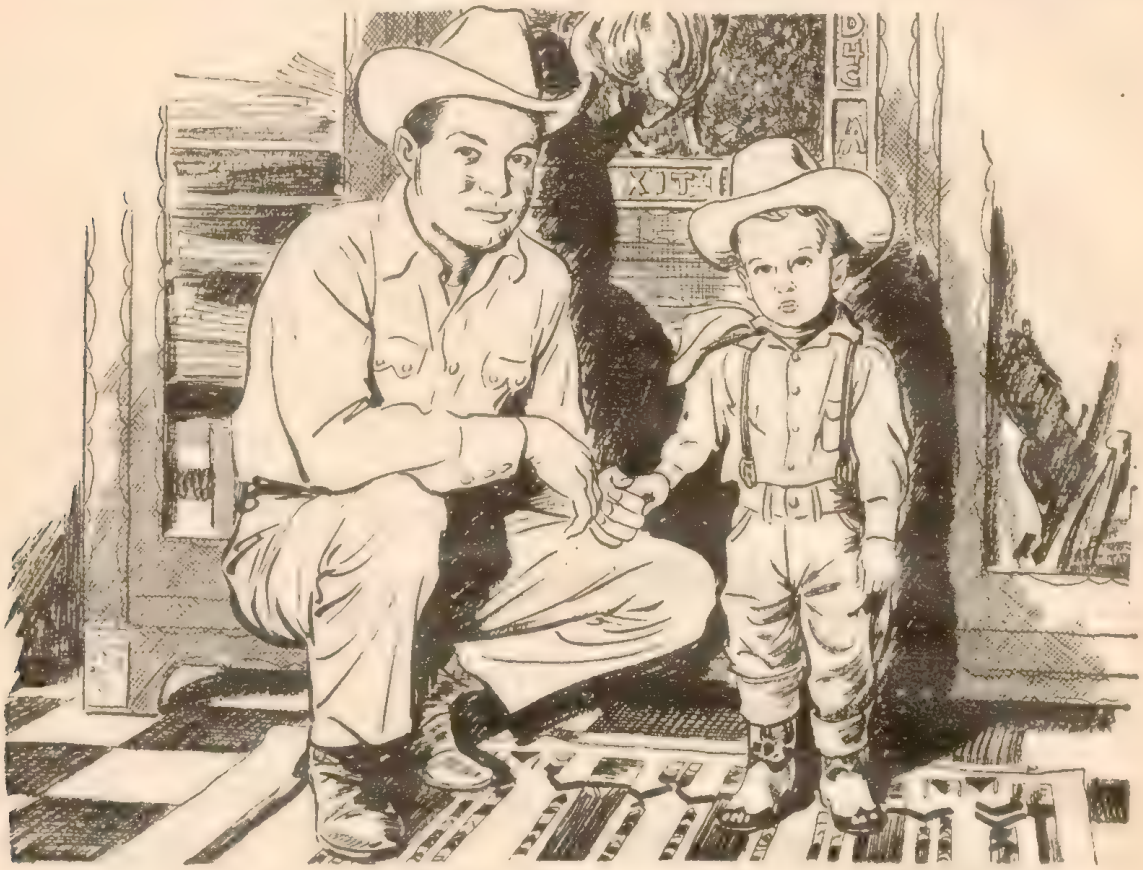
Red grinned. "Dunno about knights. But a pilot makes enough."

He did it, then. He kissed her, and the tiny firecrackers began to explode in Ellen's spine, and it was a very fine feeling.

Dimly she heard her mother say, "Well, anyhow, soup and vegetables are reducin'."



The true story of a Famous Top-Hand's Career



Louis Brooks and his son, Judge

He Quit When He Was Winning

By Elmer Kelton

WHEN THE whistle blew, the young bronc stomper shook his feet out of the stirrups and grabbed onto the pickup man while the snorting bronc plunged away from him and pitched on toward the end of the arena.

The cowboy paused to pick up his fallen hat from the arena dirt, then walked back to the chutes while the crowd cheered. An older rodeo hand took a couple of steps toward him and grinned.

"Another good ride, Brooks. Bound to

get you in the money again. Say, what're you planning on doing with all the money you're winning?"

The young puncher from Oklahoma smiled and unbuckled his chaps.

"Saving it. Going to buy me a ranch some day."

The other cowhand snorted. "That's what they all say. But it gets away from them some way. Living expenses, liquor, women. There don't many of them make it. You won't either."

But the young cowboy did make it. Louis Brooks became world's champion all-around cowboy in 1943 and 1944.

Then, when he was at his peak, he quit the rodeo game. He married a Texas cowgirl and settled down to ranching. Back in 1939 he'd gotten on a rodeo bronc because he was broke and out of a job. Today he has two ranches in West Texas and one in Colorado.

It is true that not one out of twenty cowboys ever gets a place of his own. But Brooks was one of those few.

Louis Brooks grew up on a stock farm near South Bartlesville, Okla. He left home at 16 to become a cowboy. For six or eight years he worked at first one ranch, then another, usually as a bronc rider, wearing the edges off the rough string.

One day in 1939 he was standing around on the street of an Oklahoma town. He was out of a job, and his wallet wasn't making any bulge in the pockets of his worn-out levis. Some cowboy friends came along and took him with them to a rodeo just across the line in Kansas.

In just three days Brooks won $148 riding broncs. That was as much as he had been able to make in three months at ranch jobs. He decided he had been in the wrong business.

He was a successful rodeo rider right from the first. He had topped off so many ranch broncs that he already knew the fundamentals. He never had any particularly lean times. The most serious injuries he ever received were bunged-up knees and a couple of broken ribs. To a rodeo cowboy, that's hardly worse than a bloody nose.

The first couple of years Louis stayed fairly close to home. By 1941 he had made at least 50 shows in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Mexico. That year he was champion bareback bronc rider and all-around champion cowboy of the Southwestern Rodeo Association.

Then he started making the top shows of the nation. In 1942 he won the world's champion bareback bronc rider title given by the Rodeo Association of America. The present point system of the Rodeo Cowboys Association had not begun at that time.

In 1943 Louis Brooks was champion all-around cowboy of the world and saddle bronc champion of the world, both RAA awards, as well as all-around champion of the Southwestern Association. In 1944 he was all-around champion of both associations and saddle bronc champion of the world.

He had reached his peak then. That was a time when most rodeo cowboys would just be getting their second wind. But the way Louis saw it, there was only one way to go after a man reached the top. That was down.

He figured it was time to turn to something permanent. For him that could be just one thing—ranching.

Like most rodeo cowboys, he'd let the biggest part of his earlier winnings slip through his fingers. But as time went on, he took a tighter grip on those greenbacks. In 1942 he bought a small 800-acre ranch in Oklahoma. Still, he didn't move there.

THE TURNING POINT came late in 1943, at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. There he met pretty Nita Boyd of Sweetwater, Texas. She was the daughter of Jack Boyd, a widely-known West Texas ranchman.

"Everett Colborn was producing the rodeo," Louis recalls. "He always picked some good-looking Texas cowgirls to go to the rodeo at Madison Square Garden every year. They added beauty among all us rannihans."

The next April the young couple was married. Before long, Louis Brooks, the top rodeo cowboy of the day, rolled up his

surcingle and chaps and left the rodeo game.

Occasionally he would go to a rodeo after that, if it wasn't far from home. But from then on he was strictly a ranchman.

The newlyweds acquired an eight-section ranch—5,120 acres—13 miles south of Sweetwater. Stretching over broken hills, it is one of the most colorful places in Nolan County. It had been the headquarters of the late Polk Harris, who once built up quite a cattle empire and introduced some of the first black cattle to that area.

Louis soon sold the little ranch he had bought in Oklahoma. With the money, he bought out the livestock belonging to his brother-in-law, Jack Boyd, Jr., and took over Boyd's 24-section University lease southwest of Mertzon, Texas, and just across the Crockett County line.

But drought is a constant hazard in West Texas. Louis was proud of the herd of cattle and the good flock of sheep he had built up. A long spell of dry weather might force him to sell off some of them to leave enough grass for the rest to get by on.

His rodeo travels had acquainted him with all types of range country, and he thought he knew what he wanted. In the spring of 1948 he got a chance to buy a 12-section ranch in Lincoln County, Colorado. It would be a hedge against dry weather, for Louis could send cattle there rather than have to sell them off, then buy back replacements at higher prices when rains came again.

He bought the ranch and has been glad of it ever since. For drought did come to West Texas. And while most ranchmen were having to cut deeply into their herds and flocks, Louis was able to keep the majority of his.

Louis crossbreeds Black Angus cattle with Brahmans. With a cross of ⅜ Brahman and ⅝ Angus, he keeps the black color of the Angus, along with much of their compactness and uniformity. His cattle have no horns to have to be cut off. On the other hand, they retain the exceptional foraging ability of the Brahmans.

Quitting the rodeo game did not decrease Brook's love for good horses. He raises registered quarter horses with much attention toward their running ability. Oklahoma Star is the most dominant strain in his band, but there is also some Beggar Boy and Leo blood in the bunch. Leo was the leading sire of 1949 foals now running on short tracks.

Texas cowmen never did hate sheep the way cattlemen in some other states did. Nowadays sheep are a part of almost every ranching operation in the sections of Texas to which sheep are adaptable. Lots of stockmen have raised sheep to pay off the mortgage on their cows. Louis runs sheep on both the Sweetwater and Mertzon ranches. He uses fine-wool Rambouillets, with a little Corriedale blood.

Because of the brush on his Sweetwater ranch, he also keeps good mohair-producing Angora goats there. They thrive on most forms of brush and help keep it from getting out of hand.

EVER SINCE he started ranching, Louis has been an advocate of soil conservation. To conserve his pastures and hold down erosion, he has always stocked moderately.

When range is stocked so heavily that the grass is all eaten away, nothing is left to hold down the soil against the constant blowing of the West Texas winds. With no grass to cushion their fall, raindrops pound the earth, jarring the topsoil loose a few particles at a time, and allowing swirling, muddy run-off water to wash it away.

To improve his grass, he has had bulldozers push up the cedar brush on his Sweetwater ranch. Cedar has no value as forage, and it takes up much moisture that should go to the grass. The cedar is left where it falls behind the bulldozer. As it dies, it sheds and provides mulch to hold moisture. The dead branches keep livestock away until new grass seedlings have grown strong under their protection. The grass can then spread over the ground where that same cedar had once starved it out.

Louis rests about a fourth of his land each year, giving all parts of his ranches a rest every four years. That year of retirement from grazing strengthens the turf, allows more grass to go to seed.

Until just recently, Louis and Nita Brooks lived on their home ranch south of Sweetwater. But they always had to burn up a lot of gasoline on the way back and forth from town. There were church activities, music school for their daughter Leigh. Louis became active in civic affairs, including membership in the Jaycees. He helped plan rodeos, stock shows, and other agricultural events for Sweetwater. It all meant a lot of driving.

Last fall Leigh reached school age. The Brookses decided they would save time and gasoline by moving to town, where she could be near the school. They bought a fine new home and filled it largely with Western-style furnishings.

About sunup almost every morning, Louis backs his pickup truck off the drive and heads south for the ranch. He has thirteen miles of winding, hilly road to travel before he gets to his own place. But he doesn't have to rough it like he might have a few years ago. It's paved right up to his pasture gate.

Once or twice a week he drives down through San Angelo and out to his Mertzon place. Less often he takes the road to Colorado.

Sometimes when he doesn't have much horseback riding to do, he takes Louis, Jr., along with him in the pickup. Little Louis is only two years old. Around home he's called Judge. The Brookses say he's both judge and jury around their house.

There's nothing Judge likes better than to put on his tiny shop-made boots, hat and little pair of blue jeans, and tag along with his dad. When time comes for his afternoon nap, he just curls up on the pickup seat. An hour or so later, he's up and ready to start again.

Little Leigh is much the same way. Louis has high hopes they will grow up liking the livestock business and stay in it just as their parents have.

"And if they decide some day that they want to do some rodeoing, I guess that's all right too. A little of it never hurt anybody."

Nita grew up in the saddle about like Louis did. She can ride as well as most men and be lots of help when the men are working stock. But family duties keep her at home most of the time now. She doesn't get to ride much any more.

LOUIS says he never wishes he were back in the rodeo game. Of course, once in a while when he hears cowboys discussing some current top bucking horse, he starts thinking about the great broncs like Hell's Angel that he rode once.

But if the old bronc-busting urge starts to move in him, he just has to remember some of the hard falls he took.

"You're always hearing some of the boys say they can't quit rodeoing—that it's in their blood," Louis comments. "But the main reason they can't quit is that they just don't have anything better to do.

"Me, I've got a ranch and a wife and a family. That'll take the rodeoing out of you faster than anything."

Coming up in the next issue

THE HORSE EXTERMINATORS

Ten Years Later the Ragamuffin Had Grown Into a Beautiful Woman, the Range Had Become a Hotbed of Murder—and Ed Had Turned Into the Kind of Man Who Could Cope With Both

A Magazine-Length Novel

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

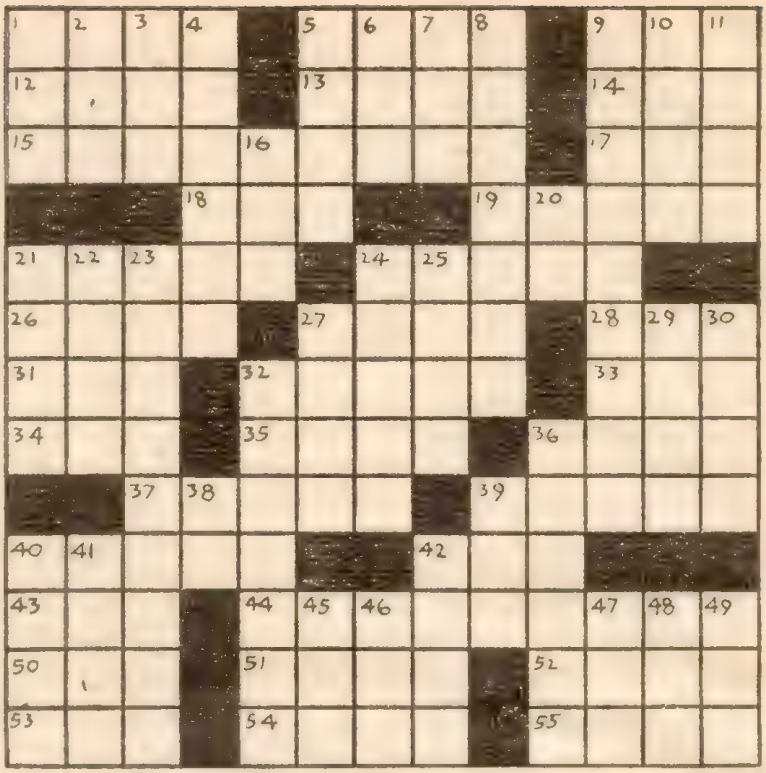
CANYON BLOCKADE

He Took Over Another Man's Medical Practice—and Troubles—in a Country Where Sixgun and Scalpel Went Hand in Hand

A Novelette

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



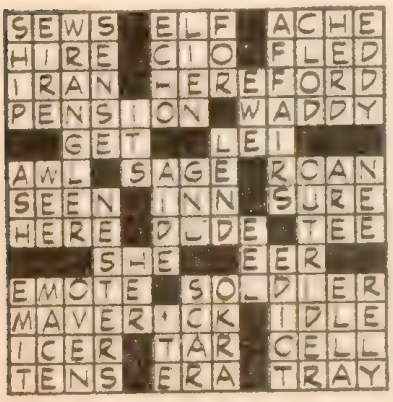
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Coloring of horses
5. To distribute cards
9. Wager
12. Church recess
13. North central State
14. College cheer
15. Not an Easterner
17. Native mineral
18. Head covering
19. Satire
21. Item of value
24. Settler's tract of land
26. Western wild animal
27. Fired a gun
28. Prefix; three
31. Table support
32. Cowboy garment
33. To help
34. To piece out
35. Bait
36. Little ball of medicine
37. Owner's mark on cattle
39. Female colt
40. Female horses
42. Pres. Coolidge's nickname
43. Australian bird
44. Northwestern prospector
50. Distress signal
51. Comfort
52. Large woody plant
53. Cigar residue
54. To boil slowly
55. Frozen crystals of winter

DOWN

1. Uncooked
2. To open (poet.)
3. Donkey
4. Lower
5. Earth
6. An eternity
7. Solemn fear
8. Cowboys' ropes
9. Long-tailed horse
10. To work for
11. Those people
16. To take food
20. Rhode Island (abbr.)
21. Competent
22. To look for
23. Western shrub
24. Swiss ——, a vegetable
25. Horse's gait
27. To keep clear of
29. Streamlet
30. Lazily
32. Groups of students
36. Aviators
38. Concerning
39. Temporary fashion
40. Western tableland
41. Partner of Andy
42. Gang
45. Cereal grain
46. To employ
47. Vase
48. George (abbr.)
49. To chop



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

ALICE THOUGHT herself free from romance—till she came across one lone male in an . . .

Adamless Eden

By Seth Ranger

FOREST RANGER Bill Maynard, a man of few words, looked thoughtfully at Alice Keene and said, "It's none of my business, Alice, and as you know I'm a happily married man and can't be accused of having a personal angle. But it isn't fair to men for a girl as lovely as you to isolate herself on a mountain peak."

"I'm *not* lovely," she retorted with feeling.

"I don't think matrimony impairs the vision," Bill said. "I'll check again."

Alice was a startling brunette whose hair was as shining as a blackbird's wing. Even in the rough, sensible clothing she was wearing she looked smart. There was a suggestion of stubbornness about her chin, but Bill decided a man could look at her profile for a lifetime and find it thrilling. Under his steady gaze she flushed slightly and her black eyes blazed with defiance.

"I've no reason to change my opinion," he said. "You should be arrested for isolating yourself in this Adamless Eden."

"Men!" She snorted. "The nice ones are all married. Why is it, if there's a first

class heel within a hundred miles, he's drawn to me." She shrugged. "Skip it. Thanks, Bill, for packing my things up here." She smiled. "Say hello to Margie and the kids. And thanks for getting me the job."

"Don't thank me," Bill said. "There's a shortage of men, and the Forest Service couldn't find a girl who was willing to roost on Granite Knob during the fire season. You were the answer to prayer."

She watched him go down the trail. At first she was afraid she would be lonely, in spite of the fact she wanted to escape beyond the sight, sound and hearing of all men. She was only conscious of a wonderful freedom.

The lookout station was a small structure. Its four walls were mostly glass, and it was held in place by cables attached to the granite peak. Its accommodations were reduced to a minimum. Here and there grass grew, where sufficient earth had gathered in cracks and depressions. There was moss growing on the rocks, breaking the harshness of the granite.

The view, literally, was out of this world. The timberline, two hundred feet below, was the crest of a mighty forest spreading in every direction. She could see brawling streams that, from this altitude, looked like silver threads tossed carelessly on a green carpet; she could see the haze of the sawmill smoke from the lumber towns, and the gleam of railroad tracks when the sun was just right.

Banner Peak towered against the horizon and when she turned her glasses on it, she saw a lookout station similar to her own. She wondered, "Who do you suppose is manning that station? No, I'll change it. Who is *womanning* the station? I hope it's some girl who is utterly fed up with men. We'll have something in common."

ALICE checked on the various instruments she had been taught to use, and spent fifteen minutes getting bearings on imaginary fires. She arranged her things in lockers, then picked up her knitting.

The radio broke in on her thoughts: "Banner Peak to Granite Knob! Banner Peak to Granite Knob. Come in, Granite Knob!"

She answered, and then there was a long silence, broken finally by a man's mutterings. "My father warned me there'd be times in a man's life when things would be terrible, and then take a turn for the worse."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Alice said. "Are you a woman-hater?"

"Women? Bah!" he retorted.

"Men," she said positively, "are heels. I had hoped there would be a sister sufferer on Banner Peak. I thought there was a shortage of men. But—no." She caught her breath. "We're stuck with each other, and we might as well make the best of it. I'm Alice Keene."

"Dick Barkuff," he answered. "Tell me, why do women act as they do?"

"If I knew why men act as they do, I might have an answer," she retorted. "Well, this isn't just the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Why did you call up?"

"To extend a hearty greeting to a fellow man," Dick replied. "Sorry I bothered you."

"You aren't, either. You're disappointed I'm not a man, but you are glad you annoyed a girl who knows men for what they are," she said.

She stalked about the room. "Darn him!" she exploded. "Now I'm all jittery again, just when I was achieving something approaching calmness." She stared at her glasses and finally said, "I wonder what he looks like?"

She turned the glass on Banner Peak and his voice came in. "Hah! That's a woman for you! Hears a man's voice, then has to break her neck to see what he looks like. Look me over, darling!"

He stepped outside of the lookout station, folded his arms and gave her a front view. Then he turned, and she saw the profile of a rugged blond man. He turned his back—broad shoulders, good neck, hair blowing in the wind. Straight legs that

seemed firmly planted. He turned around, grinned mockingly and bowed.

A few seconds later his voice came in. "With no other men around, I'll be bound to grow on you. You'll break your heart over me, and it will serve you right."

"Oh, go jump over a cliff," Alice said.

"Wouldn't think of it," he answered. "My future is most promising—no women in it."

"Don't wait around any longer," she said. "Because I'm not going to." She felt she hadn't handled the situation cleverly. But she could remedy it and enjoy herself. Unless the man was one hundred per cent woman hater, curiosity would get the upper hand and he would wonder what the only girl within his range of vision looked like. Whenever she left the station, she kept her back toward Banner Peak.

NEARLY TWO WEEKS passed without incident, then she sensed a change in the atmosphere. "Lightning storm," she exclaimed in dismay. "I never thought about lightning." She had been afraid of electric storms for years—one of her few fears.

The first crash sent a jagged bolt into a deep canyon. The next turned the air blue about the station. She saw blue flame dance along one of the cables. For a moment she couldn't move, but then she rushed to the door.

"Don't go outside, Alice! Stay inside and you'll be safe."

At that moment Dick Barkuff's voice from Banner Peak was the one thing she needed. There was in it sympathetic understanding, mixed with firmness. His words were an explanation and a command.

She closed her eyes as another bolt struck the peak, then drew a deep breath.

"Good girl," he said, as if sensing what she was going through. "This is where we get on the job. Lightning strikes a dry, pitchy snag—forest fire!"

"You were watching me?"

"Sure. I saw the storm building up," he answered. "It will be here soon. Take a look around."

She looked and saw her first fire. She got a bearing, then gave him the general location. "I see the smoke," he said. "We'll get a cross bearing and notify headquarters." Within an hour three other fires flared up. She watched the plane go over, and the smoke-jumpers parachute down. She remembered that in the forest, as in the city, the first few minutes are the most important in getting the jump on a fire. Now it was raining, and that should help, too.

"So that's the way it's done," she reflected, sitting down and waiting for the nervous tension to drain off. "It's odd the situation a girl can get into when she decides to forget a man."

She thought of Hank Borden, whose ring she had worn a few weeks ago. Hank had lost confidence in himself, as sometimes happens when a man's brothers and sisters are so brilliant that he feels unimportant by comparison.

Hank had struggled to make something of his life, and invariably had failed. His fiancée, Aggie White, had broken their engagement and returned his ring. Alice didn't remember exactly when Hank had formed the habit of dropping in for a chat, or sometimes helping her in the rose garden. Often he had said, "I don't blame Aggie for breaking the engagement. I've no worth-while future to offer a girl."

"You're in the wrong line of work, Hank," Alice had told him. "You aren't the salesman type. You never grasp the right moment to close a deal. On the other hand, you notice poor management and inefficiency and you know the right measures needed to correct them."

He had gone to work for a large firm, and it was heart-warming to watch him regain self-respect and confidence. He had proposed, and Alice had accepted. The word got around Hank was making great strides, and Aggie White put herself in Hank's path.

Alice, who was twenty-three and had gone through a previous experience, had quickly realized Aggie was winning. Hank had grown preoccupied, and his kisses had

lacked warmth. Alice had broken the engagement and taken this lookout job.

"I've felt sorry for my last man," she had declared. "I'm not going through life rebuilding guys for some other gal."

THE RAIN stopped at last, and half an hour after the sun came out she checked Banner Peak and saw Dick hanging out clothes. "Of all things," she exclaimed, "he doesn't know how to hang up his things. The shirts are all wadded up, and they'll dry in wrinkles. But it's none of my business if he wants to look like a tramp."

She stood it for four days and then she called him. "You're driving me crazy, Dick. Now this is the way to hang up shirts." She described the method in detail. He went outside and spent five minutes at the clothesline.

"That better?" he asked.

"Much better," she answered.

"You're driving me crazy, too," he said. "I wish you'd stop climbing to that overhanging rock. It's a five-hundred-foot drop straight down. If you slipped—"

"There's a depression on that rock below the sheer wall above the ledge," she said. "I've transplanted flowers that were starving for food."

"It isn't worth it," he said. "A gust of wind might pluck you off and drop you into thin air."

"You aren't eating properly," she said. "I see you wandering around with a sandwich or something in your hand. Men get careless that way. You should sit down to a table and take your time."

"Anything more?"

"You eat beef stew every night. Why don't you vary your diet?" she said.

"How do you know I eat beef stew every night?"

"Because you toss out a can with the same colored label as my beef stew cans," she said. "You're getting disgusted, or you wouldn't toss out the empty tins. You'd clean up the yard."

"There you go again," he grumbled. "Clean up the yard! Brush your hair! Get into some better looking clothes. Don't look like a tramp. That's a wife for you. Is there no escape from women?" He was muttering again. "I wish I were on the moon. No women there."

"That's what you think," she said. "If there wasn't a woman around, the Man in the Moon wouldn't have stayed that long."

"Hey, with no one around," he asked, "why put your hair up in curlers?"

"Because I like to look at an attractive woman when I face the mirror in the morning," she said. "My hair is no rat's nest, and if you've noticed I wear house dresses, too. And if I were a man, I would shave and not excuse laziness by reasoning isolation is a fine opportunity to grow a beard."

"Ouch!" he answered.

She turned the glasses on the peak, and pretty soon he came outside, hung up a mirror, lathered his face and shaved. When he had finished, he grinned, and returned to the station.

A dry spell brought fires, and they worked together getting a fix with cross bearings. "We're a fine team," Dick said. "And I'm sorry to break it up."

"What?" she exclaimed, and was astonished at her dismay.

"I'm leaving. A girl, Kathy Lane, will take my place," he said. "The air will be filled with woman talk."

BILL MAYNARD came up with supplies several days after Kathy Lane took over at Banner Peak. "I'll bet you were glad to get rid of Dick," he said. "Nice to have another girl on the job." But he regarded her shrewdly, and guessed she wasn't happy.

"Kathy's okay, I suppose," Alice said. Then, sensing she was unfair, she added, "Of course she is. But somehow Dick and I worked things out even if we did yap back and forth."

"Dick straightened himself out," Bill said. "Nice fellow. Put his money into a tree farm. You know, everyone realizes we're using timber faster than it's growing, so now it's being regarded as a crop. His trees were of various sizes—Christmas

trees, fence posts, railroad ties, telephone poles, piling. All anyone has to do is to look around and they can see where trees are used. It was going to be tough for a while, but Dick figured he could make it. He built a nice cottage, with all modern conveniences, and was as excited as a kid when he brought his fiancée to see it."

"Yes?" Alice urged.

Bill continued, "But his fiancée said, 'You don't expect any girl in her right mind to live next door to the jumping-off place!' That was when Dick said, 'The hell with everything.'"

"I don't blame him," Alice said. "I know exactly how he felt."

After Bill had gone, she went through the mail he had brought, and then sat in a thoughtful mood. "I don't believe it's possible for a girl to fall in love with a man on another mountain peak. It's just that I was lonely." She looked down on the forest and wondered which stand of timber belonged to Dick. "Darn it," she protested, "a girl has to be wooed, the man does things to arouse her interest. What did Dick do? Nothing. In turn, what did I do to attract him? Nothing. It must be mutual."

She looked through the glass at Banner Peak. Kathy had her washing out and Alice called her. "Better get it in," she said. "Lightning storm building up." She remembered the times Dick had hurriedly brought in his washing. She remembered his calming advice.

The air was familiarly quiet, as if gathering force for something tremendous. She could hear Bill's jeep deep in the timber as it dropped into the lower country. Other sounds she normally did not hear were now distinct. This might be the worst storm of her experience.

She saw lightning strike Banner Peak; then a jagged streak stabbed deep into the valley and she saw smoke start rising. She got a bearing, then called Kathy. "I'm afraid to touch anything," the girl said miserably. "Lightning is everywhere. I touched a door knob and got a shock."

Alice calmed Kathy with Dick's words. The girl pulled herself together and they got a cross bearing. Alice got in touch with headquarters. "Fire at forks of Dry Creek. Really moving."

Thunder drowned out the answer, then lightning stabbed at the lookout tower. One of the cables shed sparks, and from nowhere a blast of wind shook the tower. It screamed eerily above the constant crackle of lightning and blasts of thunder. She felt as if all this were happening to someone else. Nothing seemed real. The old impulse to run returned, but she fought it down and then called Kathy. "Stay on the job, Kathy. There'll be more fires to spot. And you're safer there than running madly away. I know!"

"Thanks, Alice," Kathy said. "I'm scared g-green."

"Brave girl," Alice said.

SUDDENLY Alice caught her breath sharply. A crown fire on the slope immediately below was running toward the lookout station. She could see blazing branches caught in the up-draft flying through the air. The branches struck treetops withering under the heat and ignited them. Tongues of flame curved downward and trees seemed to literally explode into flame. Smoke, heavy with pitch, filled the room, and Alice began coughing. The structure was shaking under the roar of the flames.

A trick of the wind cleared the mountain top briefly, and she saw a new fire miles away. She got a bearing, and then Kathy's voice came in. She had taken a bearing, and Alice calculated the exact spot on the map. "Notify headquarters," she said. "Smoke's coming again and I'll be coughing my head off."

With the smoke came heat. She saw grass and moss turn brown a hundred yards away. The station was becoming an island in a sea of flame. She was panting, sucking air into her lungs but getting little oxygen.

Above the roar she heard a jeep's exhaust, and she gasped to herself, "Bill was trapped and turned back."

The jeep stopped below the station, but the man in it wasn't Bill. It was a big man whose face was smeared with ashes and charcoal and whose shirt was pitted where tiny sparks had burned holes.

"Alice!" he roared. "Hurry!"

She opened the door, felt the impact of the burning air, closed the door, drenched herself with a bucket of drinking water, then opened the door again. She held her breath as she stumbled and jumped down the steep trail. It was cooler where he stood, but not much. "Dick Barkuff," he shouted, "though you'd never guess it." He caught her arm, raced her to the jeep, and yelled, "Hang on!"

Flames were running through the road below, but he drove through. Sometimes he would move down-grade under full throttle, then shut off, slam on the brakes and skid around a sharp curve. His face wore a grim, set expression. The big, powerful hands gripped the wheel so tightly the bones pushed against the tanned skin.

Once she almost cried out, "That snag's going to fall!" But she kept still, and the jeep leaped ahead while the snag was actually falling.

"Close!" he shouted. She looked back. The snag was now a blazing road block. There would be no retreat. A doe and fawn maddened with fear burst from a thicket and bounded down the road. The jeep closed in. "Don't want to hit 'em," Dick yelled. He sounded the horn, slowed down, then swore softly. The animal's tongues were hanging out, their large eyes glazed with terror. "Hang on!" he yelled.

The right wheels bounded over debris along the road's edge, but they squeezed past. "Game trail down the line," he said. "They'll make it."

He jammed on the brake half a mile beyond. A blazing snag blocked the road. "End of the line, Alice," he shouted. "Follow me!"

A nightmare followed—a nightmare of smoke drifting across the trail, of falls and near falls, of small animals running from the common terror.

She heard the pounding of hoofs and the doe and fawn squeezed past them. "Turnabout is fair play, Alice," Dick shouted. "We'll make it." He stopped her near a pool, brushed off the layer of ashes and said, "Soak your clothing, just in case."

Then he said, "My place is half a mile from here. Think you can make it?"

"Yes," she answered.

WHEN THEY stopped Alice leaned on a fence rail. Ahead was a neat clearing, with growing vegetables, a little pasture, chickens and a cow. The cottage was new, and there was a small car in the garage. She saw roses growing on young, vigorous bushes, and a berry patch near a small orchard. She knew without looking that his eyes were on her, and finally he said, "Like it?"

"It's wonderful, Dick," she said.

"I knew a girl, once, who wanted no part of it," he said.

He helped her over the fence and led the way to the cottage. He went inside and came back, his arms loaded.

"You'll be lost in my clothes," he said, "but they'll have to do until yours dry out."

She went inside, found the bathroom and a waiting tub. She almost went to sleep in the warm water. Half an hour later she came out, carrying her things. Then she hung them on the line, and said, "Now it's your turn."

She explored the kitchen and began preparing a meal. She heard him singing. The bitterness, the mockery she had heard when he first spoke to her from Banner Peak was gone. The real man had come to the surface.

Then the real man came out and beamed at the lunch she had prepared. "You're going to make some guy a wonderful wife."

"And you're going to make some girl a wonderful husband," she answered.

He grinned. "Wonder who the two lucky people are?" he commented.

The smoke drifted away from Granite Knob and she caught her breath sharply.

"My station is in ashes," she gasped.

"Yes," he said. "I tried to get you on a line telephone, but the line was down.

I had no radio transmitter. You see, Alice, I was responsible for you. I taught you the importance of sticking to your post, and I knew you would. I knew, too, you couldn't realize you were due to be trapped. I could see that from here. So I took off in the jeep. Bill Maynard went up for Kathy."

"You saved my life," she said.

He smiled. "I'm selfish that way," he said. "Now about the two people a girl like you and a guy like me are supposed to make happy. Any idea who they are?"

"Sort of," she said. "But it doesn't make sense. People get acquainted by close companionship, becoming interested—"

"For two people miles apart on mountain peaks, I think we did quite well in arousing interest," he said. "You drove me crazy by keeping your back turned so that I couldn't see your face. I whetted your interest by deliberately hanging my clothes the wrong way and eating the same thing night after night.

"And we had another advantage," he said, "plenty of time in the high mountain air, to think things through, get the proper perspective on our problems."

He waved his hand towards the growing timber. "It will take time, but I've figured it all out. We'll have to take care of the tree farm while we're young, but it will take care of us most of our lives."

Alice smiled at him, her eyes shining. "In a few months we could be married and take a honeymoon," he explained, smiling back at her, "and next winter I can put the finishing touches on the farm. Summer, we can pick up a few hundred bucks as Forest Service lookouts."

"On different peaks?" she suggested.

"You aren't kidding me," he answered. "Husband and wife teams are always in demand."

"Dick, you think of everything!" she exclaimed.

"That's all I had to do, up there on Banner Peak, when I wasn't looking for fires, or trying to get a good look at you," he answered, and held out his arms.

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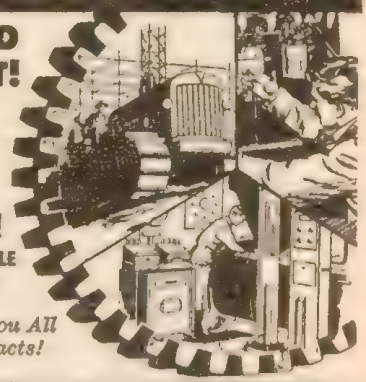

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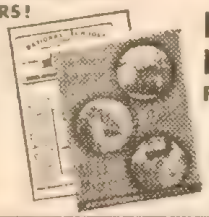

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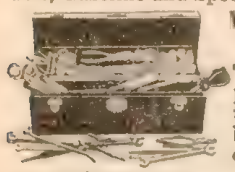

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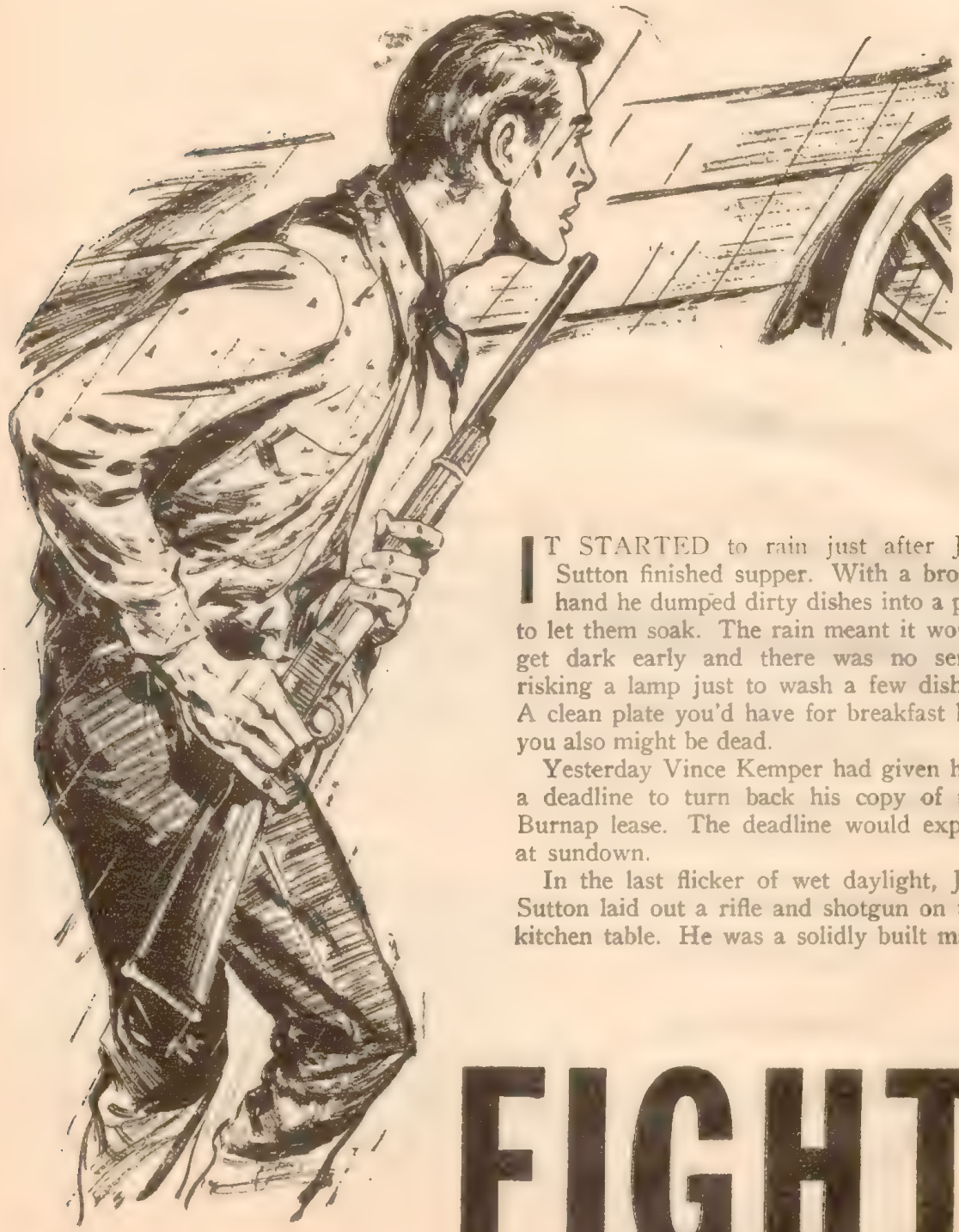
"YOU CAN TAKE SO MUCH," Jim Sutton said. "Then you've either got to get drunk, find a new woman . . . or kill a man!"



IT STARTED to rain just after Jim Sutton finished supper. With a brown hand he dumped dirty dishes into a pan to let them soak. The rain meant it would get dark early and there was no sense risking a lamp just to wash a few dishes. A clean plate you'd have for breakfast but you also might be dead.

Yesterday Vince Kemper had given him a deadline to turn back his copy of the Burnap lease. The deadline would expire at sundown.

In the last flicker of wet daylight, Jim Sutton laid out a rifle and shotgun on the kitchen table. He was a solidly built man.

FIGHT

"What sort of place is this?" she raged

or RUN

by DEAN OWEN

His shirt had been torn across one pocket. The seat of his levis were patched. Kemper said that Sutton should be wearing his new black suit in case he was foolish enough to ignore the deadline. The black suit was to be Sutton's wedding outfit. Kemper claimed it would be appropriate to bury him in it.

Desperately Sutton wanted to be a successful man. Myra Lascomb held her father up as an example. Matt Lascomb was successful, all right. He owned a sizable chunk of the country—while Jim Sutton had little to show for his reckless years but a one-room shack and three hundred head of cows to be shipped to him within the week.

He had tried to raise horses, but he'd sold them all and gone in hock at the Rincon Bank because the cattle market was rising.

Then he'd leased Lee Burnap's five hundred acres for graze, only to learn that Burnap had also leased his land to Vince Kemper. But Sutton had a prior date on his lease.

The court would probably uphold him, if he could stay alive long enough. A drunk like Burnap couldn't get away with leasing the same land to two enemies like Sutton and Kemper.

He was peering out the window into the rain-swept yard when he saw a movement by the barn. Picking up his rifle, he stepped out the rear door. He stood for a moment, letting the cool rain pelt against his face.

Although he wasn't afraid of Kemper, he knew the man wasn't above shooting him in the back.

At twenty-six, Jim Sutton believed it was time he showed a little sense. After all, he was going to marry the daughter of the biggest man in the valley. For a wedding present Matt Lascomb promised some additional acreage and a new house. You couldn't expect a girl like Myra to live in a one-room shack.

But first he had to settle this business with Vince Kemper. He didn't want to get married with this threat hanging over his head.

NOW, IN THE thickening gloom, he saw a figure by the barn. He moved forward quickly. The figure saw him and scooted away, but Jim dove, caught an ankle and skidded to his knees in the comparatively dry ground under the barn eaves. But the prowler had gone face down in the mud.

Sutton got slowly to his feet.

"Come over here where I can see you," he ordered.

"I—I want to see the lady of the house!" a female voice said indignantly.

Sutton lowered the rifle. She wore a dress, or what was left of one, he saw when he moved closer. The dress was soaked and smeared with mud. Long yellow hair fell loose and wet about her shoulders. In the faint light her eyes were angry.

She was trembling. "What sort of a place is this!" she cried. "My wagon lost a wheel. And I came here to try and get help. And then you chase me and throw me in the mud."

"I'm sorry," he said lamely.

She brushed a lock of wet hair away from her oval face. From the way her wet dress clung to her he could tell she was something extra special.

"Maybe your wife has a change of clothes," the girl said.

"I'm not married. Not yet."

Now she began to storm at him again. "I never saw such a country. There isn't one ranch in five that has a woman on it."

Her statement didn't make much sense until she explained that she traveled about the countryside selling needles and dress patterns and yard goods. He led her into the house. She held her hands over the stove.

"What am I going to do?" she wailed.

He asked about her wagon. It seemed her stock was covered by a tarp and guarded by somebody named Gringo.

She said her name was Ellamae Graystone, but everyone called her Elly. And he might just as well because it didn't look as if the rain would let up and there seemed to be no way to get a new wheel for her wagon.

She said, "Can't you light a lamp?"

"I like the dark better," he said, angry that she had upset all his plans for coping with Vince Kemper.

"Well I don't like the dark," she snapped. "Yesterday a man named Kemper—"

When she didn't finish it, he said, "What about a man named Kemper?"

"He thought just because I travel around the country that I—" Her voice broke.

She was about twenty, he judged. Maybe a little older or a little younger.

She said, "The ad I answered said it was refined work and that there were unlimited possibilities and that there was at least one woman at every ranch who would be a customer."

"And then you met Kemper," Sutton said.

She nodded. "I was never afraid of a man in my life before. I don't know what would have happened if a girl hadn't come out to Kemper's place just then. She got Kemper's attention and he forgot all about me."

Jim Sutton said, "What kind of a looking girl?"

"Black-haired. Kemper called her Myra."

SUTTON lit the lamp on the table. Elly peered at him curiously, seeing the anger on his angular brown face. "I thought you wanted it dark."

"Let 'em come," he said, as if to someone who wasn't present.

"Let who come?"

He glared at her, but made no reply.

Then she looked at the shotgun and rifle on the table. "Are you in trouble?"

"You might call it that." He eyed her. "How far is your wagon?"

"A mile or so down the road," she said, pointing east.

He narrowed his gray eyes. "A hell of a note. Letting you walk through the mud and rain."

She ran her damp hands along the soaked, clinging dress. "Well, somebody had to do it," she said.

"And this Gringo stayed behind to guard the wagon?" he said, his lips curling a little.

She looked up at him out of light blue eyes. "Of course. I have my stock and it's valuable. At least to me. After what's been happening to me around here, I'm not very fond of this country."

"Sometimes I'm not either."

She said, "Got a comb?"

He dug one up for her out of a drawer. It had two teeth missing, but she didn't seem to mind. She began to comb out her long yellow hair.

He watched her, letting his eyes move slowly over her tall figure. Under the clinging dress he could see every curve and swell of her.

"Well," she said tartly, "have you seen enough?"

In the back of his mind he was aware of a pulse that began to throb and pump a thin hunger through his veins. Too bad a man had to forget things like this just because he figured on getting married.

He said, smiling thinly, "You and this Gringo, you've got just the one wagon?"

"Isn't one enough?" she said, her eyes wide.

She sneezed and he told her she could probably find some dry clothes in a big wooden box beside the stove. Then he opened the door. A sheet of rain poured across the floor.

He looked back. "If anybody comes around, just show them the shotgun," he said.

In him was a sudden desire to get rid of her. With a new wheel on the wagon, she and this Gringo could make it into Rincon.

A QUARTER of an hour later he drove east in his buckboard, a spare wheel in the bed. When he saw a covered wagon tilted at one side of the road, he pulled up. Her team stood spraddle-legged in the rain. A wonder, he thought, that Gringo couldn't have cut one of the horses loose and ridden bareback for help.

Although he had no use for Vince Kemper, he couldn't blame him for thinking she was something easy. After all, a woman

who'd traipse around the country with a man named Gringo couldn't be too particular about where she spent the night.

Even the name grated on him. Gringo. Probably some narrow-eyed gent she'd picked up with. A man who'd received his nickname as the result of some Border foray.

Probably, he reasoned, she was fundamentally a nice kid. But she'd gotten in wrong trying to be a drummer. It was difficult enough for a man to sell stuff to ranches, let alone a woman. Either she was naive, or she was smart enough to know she was pretty and with a figure that made a man ache just to look at her.

He climbed down from the buckboard, seeing that the right front wheel had become wedged between some rocks and twisted off.

"Gringo!" he yelled into the rain. He wanted a close look at this man.

After all the tension he'd been under since this business with Kemper had started, Sutton was in a foul mood. He was a mind to beat Gringo's ears down just to show him what he thought about sharing a wagon with a cute kid named Elly Graystone.

He put a foot on the wagon step and was about to poke his head under the canvas wagon cover when he saw Gringo's eyes watching him. Just a flicker of something alive in a very dark face. The hair raised up on the back of his neck.

He could never recall how long he stood looking at Gringo. In him was a sudden desire to laugh, but his position was too precarious for that.

Gringo growled and moved his furry forelegs to the wagon seat.

Sutton sprang to his buckboard and snatched up his rifle. Gringo ducked back under the canvas and shook rain off his head. Gringo was the biggest, blackest dog Jim Sutton had ever seen.

Just as Jim turned back for the ranch, he heard shots. Two throaty explosions he knew to be shotgun blasts. And the shots came from the direction of his JS Ranch.

Fearful for Elly's safety, he whipped up the team. Above the pound of the rain he could hear the sounds of three or four horses running west along the Rincon road.

When he swung into the yard and saw her standing in the doorway with the lamplight behind her, something caught in his throat. She held the shotgun, peering out into the gloom.

"Get back in the house," he yelled at her, and brought the team to a halt and tied it.

She put down the shotgun when he sprang for the house and slammed the door.

"I'm so glad you're back, Jim."

He scowled at her white face. "How'd you know my name?"

"Those men called to you. I opened the door and told them to get out or I'd shoot. They just sat there on their horses and looked at me. Then when they didn't move, I fired both barrels into the air."

HE PUSHED her back from the door, gripping her by the arm. Now he was aware she had changed clothes. Her dress lay across the chair, and the rest of her wet clothing was spread out in front of the stove. There was a scent of lilac in the small room.

She had put on an old blue shirt and waist overalls and a pair of his socks. She had to roll up the legs of the pants, and the shirt was much too big. Buttons were missing from the top of the shirt.

When she saw him looking at her she blushed. "I need a pin," she said, and went to look for one in the litter on top of a chest of drawers.

He said angrily, "Why didn't you tell me Gringo was a dog?"

"You went to the wagon?" Then when he stood rigid, she said, "You should have told me. I'd have warned you about Gringo. He might have taken a bite out of you."

Jim Sutton snapped, "A fine watchdog. I got clear on the wagon step before I even knew he was there."

"That's the only trouble with him. He won't bark." She had taken a ribbon from the neckline of her dress and used it to tie her hair at the back of her neck.

She looked so defenseless in the baggy shirt and pants that he had to grin. "You sure sent Kemper's boys on their way with

that shotgun. It was darn good shooting."

"I'm not so sure I made much of an impression. When they rode out they were laughing."

Suddenly he caught her by the shoulders, feeling her warm skin through the fabric of his old shirt. He drew her against him and stroked her damp hair. He laughed softly. "And I thought Gringo was a man—"

She drew back quickly, staring up at him out of angry blue eyes. "Couldn't you tell

MYRA LASCOMB

by looking at me that I wasn't the kind who —who would go traveling around the country with a man?"

Now it was his turn to anger. "Haven't you any sense? No wonder Kemper thought you were something else again. A woman riding around in a wagon alone. And a pretty woman, at that."

She began to cry softly. "I—I thought it would be a good way to see the West."

That was the trouble with Easterners. They had no brains.

When she started for the door, he held her, made her promise to go with him and get the team and Gringo.

They rode in silence. It had stopped raining and in the distance the lights of Rincon were faint against the clearing sky. He unhitched her team and tied it behind the buckboard. Gringo sat between them on the seat. He wagged his long black tail and tried to lick Jim Sutton in the face.

"The damnedest watchdog I ever saw," Sutton growled.

WHEN SHE insisted on sleeping in the barn, he wouldn't hear of it. He stuck a blanket under his arm. Gringo had already settled himself by the warm stove, head between his paws, staring up at Sutton out of his unblinking eyes. When Sutton looked at him, Gringo's tail stirred. Sutton slept in the barn.

In the morning he was chopping wood behind the barn for a breakfast fire and that was probably the only reason he didn't hear the horse. He stepped across the yard, dropping his load of wood when he saw Myra's palomino in the yard.

The front door was open and he could see Myra's trim figure clad in a green silk shirt and doeskin riding pants that fit her snugly across the hips. Elly had put on a fresh dress she had taken from her wagon last night.

Myra heard the sound of the firewood dropping and she turned, her dark eyes very cool. "I heard that you had a woman out here," she said, smoothing her black hair. "I just wanted to be sure."

She started to walk briskly to her saddle horse, but Sutton caught her by the arm. "I don't know what you've heard," he said sharply, "but this girl means nothing to me."

Myra's red mouth smiled a little and she glanced at Elly who stood stiffly in the doorway.

Myra shrugged and patted Jim Sutton on the cheek. "I suppose any man is entitled to a final fling before he gets married."

"I'm not any man's final fling!" Elly cried furiously.

Myra surveyed the girl in that calm, superior manner of hers. "Oh, yes, I remember you now. The girl who peddles needles and yard goods and—things."

Elly charged out the doorway, her yellow hair flying, but Sutton blocked her. "Get back to the house," he told her severely. "I'll straighten this out."

Elly gave him a black look, then went into the house and slammed the door. Then she opened it. "How do you like your eggs, Jim?" she asked with exaggerated sweetness.

"Straight up," he snapped, his face flaming.

Myra turned for her horse. "I'll forget what I saw out here this morning. But I want her out of here. You understand?"

"Speaking of final flings," Jim Sutton said, boosting her into the saddle, "what were you doing out at Kemper's place?"

Myra glanced at the house, then back at Sutton.

When she made no reply, Sutton said, "I thought that thing with Kemper was over."

She smiled, leaned down and put her hand lightly on his shoulder. "Maybe I wanted to talk him out of shooting you. I want to be your bride, not your widow."

She gathered the reins, still smiling. "I have a new dress for the dance. Hope you like it, Jim."

ELLY COULD cook, that was one thing he could say for her. When she cleaned up the dishes, she said, "You're going to marry that—that girl?"

She stood beside the stove, the heavy skillet in her hands. She looked as if she wanted to hit him with it.

"Myra's a woman any man would be proud to have for a wife," he said, and looked away.

"And she's got a rich father," Elly said. "That helps."

Sutton felt blood push to his face. He gave her an angry glance and rose from the table.

She said, "Don't be so angry about it, Jim."

He scowled at her. "What you need is a husband. You'll get into trouble if you keep traipsing around the country like this."

"Any ideas?" she said, and dumped the skillet into the dishpan and began to scrape it.

"Maybe. If you were to be at the dance Saturday night, I might see what I can do."

She gave him a wicked look. "I'll be there."

Gringo chased rabbits in the brush while Sutton cursed the broken wheel and finally replaced it with his spare. Then he hitched up her team.

When she climbed to the seat, she handed him a small package she dug out of a box. "You've been so nice to me," she said sweetly, "I want to repay you."

When she drove down the Rincon road he opened the paper folder. It was a package of needles. . . .

Jim Sutton sweated out the day but Kemper didn't appear until the following day. Sutton was on a brushy slant behind the house, having spotted Kemper and his three riders coming across the flats. Jim rose, covering them with his rifle.

Kemper was tall, handsome in a rough sort of way. Now he tilted back his hat and a lock of pale hair fell across his forehead. He had light eyes and the type of skin that will never tan. His long nose had been sunburned across the tip. When he grinned, his strong teeth glistened in the sunlight.

"You fighting your own battles this morning?" he drawled, careful to keep his hand away from his belt gun.

His three men were hard-faced. They carried revolvers, and rifles in saddleboots. They stared up at Sutton impassively as if he might be a cow about to be snaked out of a herd and shot for fresh beef.

Kemper said, "The other night I came by to give you a message." He rolled a cigarette, grinning at his foreman, Huck River. River's heavy face relaxed as much as it ever did. He almost smiled.

River said, "Where's the new hired hand, Sutton? The gal in man's pants?"

Sutton said, "What's the message, Kemper? Tell me, then get off my land."

Kemper thumbed a match and touched the flame to his cigarette. He stared up through a cloud of blue smoke. "You try moving any cows on the Burnap lease and they'll be dead."

"You rode a long ways in the hot sun just for nothing," Jim Sutton said.

With the cigarette dangling from a corner of his thin mouth, Kemper retorted, "I gave you a deadline to turn your lease back to Burnap. And you didn't do it." He let smoke escape through his flaring nostrils. "Maybe you think the four of us couldn't take you."

"You're doing the talking," Sutton said. "What do you think?"

Kemper stared up the slant. Sutton stood tall and grim in his patched shirt and faded levis. A breeze rumpled his brown hair.

Huck River said, "You're beat, Sutton. Why don't you admit it?"

"I'm not beat till I'm dead."

"And we can fix that," River growled.

Kemper threw his cigarette to the ground. "The girl sort of turned us back the other night," Kemper said. "I don't much like having somebody shoot a shotgun over my head. But she's a smart girl. She'll do all right around here. But not with you."

Sutton lifted the rifle. "You've had your say. Now clear out."

"I'm giving you your last chance," Kemper said. "Turn back that lease or burn it up. I don't care what you do with it."

"We've got courts to settle those things. And in the meantime I've got a prior claim. I intend to use it."

Kemper swung his horse. "Myra ought to look good in black. That is, if she's fool enough to marry a man who's already measured for a coffin."

THAT AFTERNOON Sutton rode over to Ruel Cannister's 7 Cross outfit. Cannister was a tall, rawboned man, hardworking and frugal. In addition to improving his own spread, he also had a contract to manage all of Matt Lascomb's property. Now that the valley had suffered through four years of a sagging beef market, Cannister stood to make himself some money with rising prices.

Cannister greeted Sutton on the porch. At first, when it became evident that Sutton was going to marry Myra Lascomb, Cannister had expressed concern that Lascomb's new son-in-law might move in on him. But Sutton assured him he had no intention of taking over Cannister's contract with Lascomb. He was content that Matt Lascomb had promised more than a thousand acres outright as a wedding gift.

When Sutton put his proposition up to Cannister, the rancher shook his head.

"I'd let you hire my crew to move your cows to the Burnap lease," he said, "but I got to keep out of this."

"Kemper got you scared along with everybody else in this country?"

Cannister's face flamed. "I don't take kindly to that talk, Jim."

Sutton couldn't blame him for being afraid of Kemper. Vince Kemper and his crew had a tough reputation.

Three years ago Kemper had drifted in and opened a warsack and paid cash for the old Andrews place. If anybody ever wondered how Kemper and Huck River happened to have a sackful of fresh green money, the subject was never mentioned. At least within earshot of Kemper and his men.

Cannister said, "Look at it sensibly. You're going to marry Myra Lascomb. You'll have all the land you need then. Forget the Burnap lease."

"This fight is between Kemper and me. The Lascombs have nothing to do with it." He noted the tight set to Cannister's face. "What you need is a wife." He waved his hand at the ranchyard. "This isn't worth much without a woman to share it."

Cannister gave him a slow smile. "Once I had an idea about Myra. But that was before you and—" He broke off, his face flushing.

"Before me and Kemper came along," Sutton finished for him. "There'll be a girl at the dance Saturday. Elly Graystone. She'd make some man a good wife."

Cannister said, "Is she the one Kemper found at your place?"

Sutton looked at him. "Kemper's better than the telegraph for carrying news."

Cannister changed the subject. "When do you expect your shipment?"

Sutton told him the cattle cars should arrive the next day.

Cannister looked pained. "No hard feelings about me not letting you have my men."

Sutton said, "Don't worry about it, Ruel." He started down the porch steps.

Cannister said, "I got to be neutral in this."

Sutton looked at him. "Maybe you'll learn when it's too late that you've got to stop a man like Kemper some time. The sooner it happens the better." He gathered his reins and stepped into the saddle.

Behind the man stood Elly Graystone, holding a whisky bottle in her hand

Cannister gripped the porch rail with his big hands. "I got no quarrel with Kemper."

"I hear he's talking about throwing a fence across Red Gap. If he does it'll cut you off from Minnick Springs. Seems like that's enough to quarrel about."

Cannister said, "We can handle that to our mutual satisfaction."

Sutton gave him a tight smile. "If Kemper had any brains he'd pick me off first. Then he'd start in about the fence at Red Gap. But he's like the rest of his breed. He moves in every direction at once."

"You got no right to stir things up," Cannister protested. "You and Kemper start throwing lead and there's no telling where it will end. Maybe you never saw a range war. I have."

"So have I," Sutton told him. "But you either have to fight or run when you're dealing with a man like Kemper." He tightened the reins. "See you at the dance, Ruel."

HE HAD expected Kemper to pay another visit, and when he didn't, Sutton became worried. He rode into Rincon the next afternoon. All along he had planned to use Cannister's men to help shove his herd onto the Burnap lease. It had never occurred to him that Cannister would flatly refuse.

He swung into the cool green yard of the Lascomb house in Rincon and tied his horse. He could see Myra's father talking to Lee Burnap in the shade of the grape arbor beside the big two-story white house.

When the two men saw him, Matt Lascomb hastily hid a half-filled quart of whisky behind a grapevine. Lee Burnap rose on shaky legs and began to rub a nervous hand across his chin. His eyes, as red and veined as his nose, attested to his daily account with a bottle.

Lascomb also looked nervous. He lifted a bony hand in greeting. He was tall, long-nosed. In the years since he had turned his range over to Cannister's management he affected town garb, a striped gray suit and white shirt which clung to his hard-ribbed torso.

Jim Sutton didn't give more than a passing speculation as to why Lascomb would be setting out whisky when he knew how Burnap was.

Sutton looked at Burnap. "Been looking for you, Lee."

The muscles in Burnap's flabby neck stirred. "Guess you're sore about the lease?"

"Shouldn't I be?" He had always felt a little sorry for Burnap. "You gave me a lease, then turned around and gave the same lease to Kemper."

Lascomb ran a thin forefinger along the high bridge of his nose and gave Sutton a speculative glance. "I was just telling Burnap that a man shouldn't let whisky upset him so much that he can't tend to business."

Burnap wet his lips. "I couldn't help

what happened." He gave Lascomb a reproachful look. "I wasn't drunk that day."

Aware of some inner tension in Burnap, Sutton said, "Tell me what happened."

Suddenly Burnap unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off, then dropped his undershirt down over his bony hips. He turned his back. Angling from his thin shoulders down across the small of his back were half a dozen ugly welts. Slowly he pulled up the undershirt and slipped into his shirt.

Jim Sutton said in a small tight voice, "Who did it, Lee?"

Burnap flicked his eyes to Lascomb, then looked at Sutton. "Vince Kemper. He catched me out alone. He had a copy of a lease made out. All I had to do was sign it, he said."

He made a false start in buttoning his shirt, his hands were trembling so, and had to start over. "Huck River, that ramrod of his, used the end of a wet saddle rope on me."

Lascomb cleared his throat. "You run along, Lee. We'll discuss our business later."

Burnap started to say something to Sutton, then shuffled across the yard until a corner of the house hid him.

FOR A LONG moment Jim Sutton looked at the man who was to be his future father-in-law. Suddenly it seemed that he had never known him before. He felt an emotion that was very close to complete dislike.

"How about a drink?" he asked Lascomb. "Seems like I could suddenly use one."

"Come into the house, Jim," Lascomb said and started to lead him to a side door.

Sutton said, "Let's have a drink out of the bottle you and Lee were nursing when I came up."

Lascomb's face turned red. "Sure—sure, Jim." He plucked the bottle from behind a vine and handed it over.

Without taking his eyes from Lascomb's face, Sutton uncorked the bottle and took a long drink. Then he said, "Whisky's no good for Lee. Were you maybe trying to get him drunk—for a reason?"

Lascomb gave a start. "I—er—was suggesting that he take a trip some place. New scenery might help erase his craving for drink."

"So he wouldn't be around if this business about his lease should get into court?"

Sutton never did know why he said that. But suddenly, looking into Lascomb's small, bright eyes, he knew he had struck at the truth.

Lascomb looked helpless, not at all like the man whose shrewd brain had built a fortune on this range. They said he had come here twenty years ago when land was for the taking.

He had brought in a herd of gaunt Texas cattle and held them until the copper camps above El Cajon were yelling for fresh beef at any price. They said he had grabbed and stolen and made a lot of people hate him. But now at forty-five he was retired. A respected citizen, a stockholder in the bank and owner of a block of business buildings downtown.

Lascomb said slowly, "One thing you've got to remember. In this world there are all types of women. Some of them enjoy seeing two men fight. Going back to the primitive, I guess you'd call it."

"You mean Myra wants to see me and Kemper try to kill each other?"

"You might as well consider the prospect, Jim," Lascomb said, then broke off.

SUTTON turned to follow his eyes. Myra and Vince Kemper were just riding into the yard. Myra wore a plaid shirt and a divided skirt. In the sunlight her dark hair glistened. Kemper swung down on his long legs and held up his hands for her. She jumped lightly into them and stood there a moment, laughing up into Kemper's face.

Then she saw Sutton and her father in the arbor, and ran forward. She kissed Sutton on the cheek and turned to point at the pinto she had been riding.

"Vince was showing me the pony. It's a good buy. I thought maybe I could talk you into giving it to me for a wedding present."

Kemper walked forward, his eyes insolent. "It would be a good start for a

stable, Sutton. And I've got its mate. That is, in case you figure on starting a stable."

Sutton said, "Don't talk in riddles."

Kemper shrugged. "I'm talking about the gal you had out at your place the other night. A man with two women ought to have two horses."

It was bold and insulting, but neither Lascomb nor Myra made any protest. She only giggled nervously. "I'll be more than enough woman for Jim."

Sutton said, "I'll be in the Antler at four o'clock, Kemper. I'm not going to give Myra the satisfaction of killing you in front of her."

As he strode for his horse, he heard Kemper's soft laughter. Then Kemper's voice, saying, "I want to have a serious talk with you, Matt."

When Sutton looked back, Lascomb and Kemper had gone into the house. Myra stood looking at him, her hands clenched at her sides. He rode downtown. . . .

Sutton took a bottle to a corner table in Henry Tolman's Antler Saloon. He looked at a grandfather's clock in the corner beside a square piano. It said three-fifteen. In forty-five minutes he'd face Vince Kemper. This time it was Sutton who had given the deadline.

Tolman, a bald man with yellow handlebar mustaches, said, "You look worried, Jim."

Sutton poured a drink. "Let me know if you see Vince Kemper ride up."

Tolman studied the tight set of Jim Sutton's features. Then he waved a plump pink hand toward his backbar. "Those mirrors came all the way from Germany. I'd hate to see them shot up, Jim."

"I'll be shooting at Kemper. Not your mirrors."

The half-dozen men at the bar must have overheard, for now they hurriedly finished their drinks and filed out to take up a position across the street.

They were passing along the word, and in a few minutes quite a crowd had gathered to watch both ends of Fremont Street, then turn their eyes to the Antler where Jim Sutton sat alone with his bottle.

Tolman said, "I knew that one day Kemper would push you too far. But you're a fool to let him box you."

"You can take so much," Sutton said, aware of a deep depression. "Then you've either got to get drunk, find a new woman or kill a man. It all adds up to the same thing, I guess."

"Kemper's rough with a gun. You're no match for him."

"We'll see," Jim Sutton said, and pushed the bottle aside.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK Matt Lascomb entered by the rear door, wearing his narrow-brimmed town hat. He saw Sutton at the table and kicked through the damp sawdust on the floor. He pulled back a chair and sat down heavily.

"You think I'm a coward because I let Kemper say an insulting thing in front of my daughter."

Sutton just looked at him without answering.

Lascomb's narrow face turned red. "In this country there's one thing a man can have too much of. Land."

Sutton shoved the bottle over and said, "You need a drink." And when Lascomb poured a drink, Sutton said, "You trying to tell me you're broke?"

Instead of the shrewd businessman Sutton had always thought him to be, Lascomb now seemed small and frightened. But he felt no pity as he did for Lee Burnap.

Lascomb looked down at the table top. "I wanted a son-in-law who could pull me out of a hole, Jim. That's blunt talk, I know. But this is a blunt world. I don't have enough sand in me to start over again."

"You made a bad choice in a son-in-law? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Lascomb bit his lips. "You're a good man. But too easygoing. No guts. You're like Ruel Cannister. You let people push you around."

He sighed, then added, "I thought when this trouble cropped up between you and Kemper, you'd kill him. But when he rode out to your place you were gone. In your place he found a girl. Now the story's all over the country. It doesn't do me any good."

Sutton looked at him. "Kemper is tough and a man who'll go far in this country. He'll shoot his neighbors in the back. He'll steal water and cut fences. But one of these days he'll be the big auger." Sutton rose from table. "Kemper isn't going to meet me here, is he?"

Lascomb shook his head. "We—we talked him out of it."

"You and Myra?"

Sutton gave a mirthless smile when Lascomb made no reply. "Is that how you got your start around here, Matt? The way Kemper is getting his?"

Lascomb's lips whitened. "Now wait a minute—"

"By taking a wet saddle rope to an old drunk like Lee Burnap?"

Lascomb kicked back his chair. "I won't let you talk to me that way, Jim."

Sutton gave him a hard smile. "I think you will."

Lascomb swallowed. "You've got a chance. Take it. Kemper will give you two thousand dollars for your land and the cows you've got coming."

Sutton laughed. "You showed your hole card, Matt. And it's as yellow as the stripe up your back. You got big in this country, but you had a tough crew. When you retired you let a nice guy like Cannister run things.

"But now things are tightening up. Money's short but there's a lot to be made in beef if you can just hang on. You're in a trap and you're running to Kemper because he's the same kind you were back in the old days."

Matt Lascomb stiffened. "Myra is her own boss. If she wants Kemper for a husband, it's her decision. Not mine!"

WHEN THE crowd across the street saw Sutton stalk from the Antler alone, some of the faces showed relief, others disappointment.

At the bank he drew out his cash, eight hundred dollars, and rode down to Miller's, a small combination pool hall, saloon and mercantile. If there was anyone in Rincon who wanted a fast dollar, he would be hanging around Miller's.

He found three men who said a hundred dollars apiece sounded good for a month's work. A month was all the time he needed, Sutton decided. Either he'd be dead by that time or Kemper would. The problem would be settled either way.

But when Huck River rode up and dismounted and started yelling for Jim Sutton, the three men hastily said they figured it wasn't worth the money. They didn't know Sutton was having trouble with Kemper and his foreman.

Sutton shoved the money back in his pocket and stepped to the walk that rose here a good eighteen inches above the street.

River said, "The boss promised the Lascomb girl he'd leave you alone. But it don't include me."

A pulse began to hammer in Sutton's throat as the big foreman tied his horse. Even if he was lucky enough to come out of an encounter with the beefy River with a whole skin, there was still Vince Kemper.

But suddenly he didn't care any longer. River and his boss had wormed their way insidiously into the affairs of the valley. Cutting a little here and there, picking up a homestead, fencing off water. And the rest of the country had let them get away with it. Even hard-headed Ruel Cannister was going to sit by and let his neighbor go down because he didn't like the prospects of a range war.

River unfastened his gunbelt and looped it over his saddle-horn.

"I'm not wearing a gun," he said, flexing his thick arms. "And I'm going to beat off your damned head. If you shoot me it'll be the same as murder."

Sutton tasted the dryness in his own throat. When he unlaced his gunbelt and turned to lay belt and gun on the edge of the walk, River leaped forward and struck him a savage blow on the side of the head.

Sutton sprawled across the walk, driving a long splinter just below his right knee. He twisted aside as River tried to kick him in the head. He seized the foot and twisted hard. River turned over in mid air and landed on hands and knees. Instantly he was on his feet again.

From the main section of town Sutton could hear the sound of men converging on the scene. In the air were the strident cries: "Fight! Fight! It's Sutton and Huck River!"

As River watched him out of small hard eyes, Sutton got slowly to his feet. He pulled the long sliver from his leg, wincing as he finally got it freed. A streak of blood darkened his pants leg.

The men who had been shooting pool inside came to stand on the walk. One of them held a cue stick and a seven ball in his hand.

Sutton was then aware of Lee Burnap shouting, "Kill him, Jim. He was the one took the rope to me!"

SUTTON waited, eying the big foreman. He had to keep his distance, for once River caught him the man's weight would decide the fight. River was big and fast for all of his two hundred and fifteen pounds.

Suddenly River came in again, his fists jolting Sutton's head back. He took a blow that scraped the right side of his face, caught another smash in his mouth. Desperately he drove River back, keeping a left fist rocking along the heavy jaws.

For all his strength, River had a fondness for beer and no inclination to wear off his growing paunch. Sutton struck twice, feeling his fists sink through the soft layer of fat until they came solidly against the hard muscles of the foreman's abdomen.

River grunted a little and gave ground. But he was grinning, and there was no pain in his small eyes. He let his gaze slide to Burnap who stood on the crowded walk. Lee Burnap's face was flushed, probably the result of a stop at the Antler.

They said Lee Burnap had arrived in this country a year before Matt Lascomb. Now all he had left was five hundred acres beyond Minnick Creek, without even a house on it. It must be hard, Sutton had reflected on occasion, to come to a country full of ambition and finally realize you were no match for the shrewd Lascombs and the Kempers. But with a bottle at his elbow a man could forget many things.

Huck River wiped a torn shirtsleeve across his mouth and glared at Burnap, who was yelling encouragement to Jim Sutton.

"Next time I'll take a gun barrel to you," River said, "instead of a rope. You ain't being very smart, yelling for Sutton that way."

And hardly had the words left the big foreman's lips than he was lunging at Sutton again, this time bringing his knee up sharply. Sutton twisted aside and the knee missed its mark.

He hit River in the face, then brought up his right with all the power of torso and shoulder going into the blow. River's head snapped back and his eyes were momentarily crossed. Sutton came in quickly. End it now, he kept telling himself. End it now.

Again his fists found the layer of fat above River's belt line. He was aware of the crowd yelling.

River's breath whistled. A pallor spread quickly across his heavy features. Then he suddenly clamped thick arms around Sutton's arms, pinning them to his sides. And River locked his fingers behind Sutton's back.

At the hitchrail a horse was snorting and kicking. One of the men grabbed the reins and led it through the crowd.

RIVER hung on, increasing the pressure as Sutton vainly tried to free himself. He could feel the stubble of River's cheek against his face. River said, "You had your chance. Now I'm going to break your back on the edge of the walk."

With his superior weight he dragged Sutton to the street. But at the last moment Sutton squirmed and brought his head down sharply on the bridge of River's nose. Bone cracked. Blood spurted across the foreman's face.

With River's blood drenching his shirt, Sutton broke free. He stepped back just as River got to his feet. Sutton stepped in and smashed him in the face. River retreated, covering up.

Then suddenly River leaped to the walk. The man who had been holding the cue ball and the stick was knocked back against

the front of Miller's. Before the man fell, River snatched the hard cue ball and threw it.

Sutton ducked, feeling the ball glance off his shoulder. There was the sound of breaking glass across the street.

Then River grabbed the pool cue from the walk and leaped. He swung the weighted end, narrowly missing Sutton's head. Had the blow landed it would have split his skull.

When River was off balance, Sutton struck him again in the center of his bleeding face. What was left of the foreman's nose collapsed.

River screamed, tried to regain his balance. Sutton struck him again, this time finding the point of his chin. He felt the shock clear to his heels.

River fell forward, the pool cue snapping off under his weight. When River struck the ground Sutton saw the small jagged end of the pool cue projecting from his back.

Sickened, he turned away, feeling a tremble in his legs. They turned River over and pulled the broken pool cue from his shoulder. The man's eyes were open, hating Jim Sutton. For a moment he lay squirming in pain, then suddenly he went limp.

Lee Burnap touched Sutton on the arm, concern on his lined, young-old face. "You all right?"

Jim Sutton could only nod his head.

WHEN HE pushed through the crowd to get his horse, something brought him up short. He saw a huge black dog. At sight of Sutton he began to wag his tail.

Beside the dog lay a man face down in the narrow alleyway between Miller's and an abandoned assay office. Clutched in the man's limp hand was a revolver. Behind the man stood Elly Graystone.

She wore a green dress and her hair was brushed back severely from her temples. She stared at Jim Sutton. In her right hand she held an empty whisky bottle that someone had thrown into the alley.

Sutton turned the man over on his back. It was Red Carmody, one of the riders who had been with Kemper and Huck River the other morning.

Sutton straightened up and tried to smile. "Thanks, Elly."

Elly said in a frightened voice, "He was going to shoot you—in the back."

Then she was sobbing against Jim Sutton's chest. He pushed her gently away, for the front of his shirt was covered with River's blood.

While the crowd looked on silently, Lee Burnap said, "We got to learn to take sides in this country and stick to it. Stay on the fence too long and you'll get nothing but barb wire in the seat of your britches."

He looked at Sutton. "I been a coward, Jim. Too yellow to even sit on a fence. Your lease is valid. I'll go into court and swear it."

"Thanks, Lee."

Burnap said, "And I'll help move your cows onto my lease."

Lee Burnap had long been a subject of ridicule. A man who clung tenaciously to his last five hundred acres so the lease money would provide him with drinks and the necessary food to keep his stringy body alive. If his words now shamed anyone in the crowd, they gave no outward sign of it. A few men shifted their feet nervously, but that was all.

And Sutton couldn't altogether blame them. True, he had whipped Huck River. But there was still Kemper. And he had a tough crew. Most of these men had wives and kids. Some of them, like Ruel Cannister, had come here to forget the ravages of other range wars.

No, he couldn't honestly blame them. This had gone too far now. If he got his cows on the Burnap lease, it would mean that Kemper had suffered his first defeat in this country. Kemper's prestige was at stake.

When Sutton looked around, Elly and the black dog were gone.

They had carried Huck River into Miller's place. Red Carmody was beginning to stir in the alley where Elly had struck him down with the whisky bottle.

At Tolman's Antler Saloon, Sutton bought a beer and helped himself to the free

lunch. Then he crossed the street to the hotel and got a room. Every muscle in his body ached from his encounter with River. When he awakened in the morning his right leg was so stiff he could hardly move it. He saw that he had got all the sliver out of it, so decided to let it alone.

STEPPING outside, he saw a sign on Gorland's Hall: Spring Dance, March 22. That was tonight. He had forgotten all about it. All winter he had been looking forward to taking Myra. This night they were to have set the date for their wedding.

At the far end of town he heard a train whistle and saw a freight engine spotting cattle cars on the siding. He got his horse from the livery and rode down in time to sign some papers a brakeman thrust at him.

Then he watched his three hundred head of cows prodded out of the cars and into the pens beside the track. When the train pulled out, he sat on the top rail of the fence, chewing a piece of straw.

He heard Lee Burnap's voice in his ear. "When do we start moving these cows, Jim?"

Sutton shifted his right leg, winced at the pain. "You're working overtime, Lee, trying to get yourself killed."

"This way," Lee Burnap said, his eyes still watery and bloodshot, but direct on Sutton's face, "maybe they can think up something decent to put on my tombstone."

"I'm beginning to wonder if it's worth it. Fight and kill or be killed. Maybe I ought to sell out and try a new country."

Lee Burnap rubbed a forefinger along the cleft in his chin. "You can run. But there'll always be a Kemper. I know."

The sound of a horse moving up beside the fence caused Sutton to turn his head. Myra Lascomb stepped lightly from the saddle and settled to the fence rail beside Jim. Burnap excused himself and shuffled down the road to the business district.

Myra said a little tremulously, "I heard what you did to River. It was wonderful, Jim."

He turned to look at her. Never was her beauty more apparent with the sunlight touching her clear skin, the sheen of her dark hair.

He said, "I beat a man and you think it's wonderful? Why?"

"Maybe a woman likes a man who can fight." Her fingers were warm and moist against his wrist.

When he withdrew his hand she moved closer to him.

She said, "I heard what you said to Burnap. And I believe you're right. Take me away. I hate this country."

He looked at her. "You want me to sell out. And you want to go away with me. But what about your father? He's in trouble."

"He's made his bed." She tossed her dark head and stared at the cattle milling about the enclosure.

He looked away at the cool green hills. In another month they would be parched and the heat would draw a man's nerves tight and he'd be fighting from now until winter to see that his tanks were full, that his cows had enough to drink. It was hellish country.

"You made up my mind for me, Myra," he said, without turning his head.

She pushed a soft shoulder against him. "We could leave tonight and be married—" Her voice was low and inviting. "We could arrange for the bank to handle the sale of your place—"

"Like I said, you made up my mind for me. I'm staying here."

HE STEPPED down from the fence and looked up at her perched on the top rail. She had wanted him to go away with her. Even a few hours ago the idea would have sent his pulse racing.

Halfmoons at the corners of her mouth deepened. For a long moment she peered down at him, then she said, "We'll go to the dance tonight. As if nothing has happened."

"That's going to be hard to do. I hear you've chosen Vince Kemper."

She tossed her dark head. "Do you believe everything my father says?"

"Maybe," he told her, and boarded his horse. "If I go to the dance it'll be with somebody else."

Myra's eyes flashed angrily. "That—that girl with the needles!"

He didn't even turn around to look at her, but rode uptown.

Nice girls didn't live at hotels if they could help it. And he had suddenly made up his mind about Elly. So he tried two boardinghouses before he found her wagon pulled up beside a two-story frame building. Lying in the shade under the wagon was Gringo. He wagged his tail and caught Sutton playfully by the wrist.

Elly wasn't home, but he left a note.

He went to Tolman's. Lee Burnap was at the bar, a shotglass in his right hand. He looked embarrassed when Jim walked in.

"I was just having one drink, Jim," Burnap said. "We got a lot of riding to do tomorrow. A man's got to have steady nerves."

When Sutton had a drink with him, Burnap said, "This stuff has about ruined me, Jim."

"Whisky's all right for some men. Poison for others."

"I'm going to try and quit. Honest I am."

At eight o'clock that evening when Jim Sutton emerged from the barber shop, Lee Burnap was drunk again.

Henry Tolman drew Sutton aside. "I'll help drive your cows."

Jim Sutton looked at the saloonman. Tolman had a wife and five kids. It was different with Lee Burnap. Lee had no one.

Sutton said, "I'll manage somehow. But thanks."

When he turned down the dark street toward Elly's boardinghouse, he was aware of a black depression. Only two men had offered to help him. One of them had a family. The other one was a drunk. If the job was done at all, he'd have to do it alone.

WHEN HE met Elly he knew she'd received his note for she was wearing a white dress. She had piled her yellow hair high on her head. She was pretty and she knew it. The dress fell loosely about her hips. Tonight she looked more mature.

She said, some of the eagerness fading from her face, "Will Kemper be at the dance?"

"Probably."

She looked at him a long moment, studying him with her light blue eyes. "You want to get it over with, don't you?"

He wore a new white shirt and black string tie and black pants, new purchases he had made at Jensen's Store. But his face was still skinned from River's fists. He wasn't very pretty.

He said, "Are you afraid to go with me?"

She took his arm.

When they were on the porch, he said, "I should have brought a buggy."

"Don't be silly. I can walk."

They moved along the dark street toward the sounds of revelry in Gorland's Hall—music and the scrape of feet and the brash laughter of the young men who were passing a bottle in the lot beside the hall, filled now with saddle horses and wagons.

She said, "I lied to you, Jim. I—I'm not from the East at all. I was born out here. In Prescott. My parents are dead. My uncle wanted me to marry a man I didn't like. I decided to answer that advertisement I told you about." She peered up at him. "I went out deliberately, to look for a husband."

He laughed. "You're the most honest person I've met. It's a relief."

Hearing something move in the darkness behind him, he turned quickly. He reached for the revolver he wore in his belt under his buttoned coat. It was Gringo.

Elly said, "He likes you."

With the dog following them, they crossed the lot where the teams and wagons and saddlers were tied. The laughter and talk halted when they were recognized.

A man said, "Kemper just went upstairs, Jim. Thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks," Jim said, aware that Elly's hand had tightened on his arm.

AT THE top of the stairs Matt Lascomb was drinking a cup of punch at a long table. When he saw Sutton his narrow face flushed. He looked at Elly,

then nodded curtly and turned on his heel.

Couples drifted off the floor in the sudden silence, and the piano and fiddle and banjo kept trying to lure them back. But when the floor was completely empty, the music died. All eyes were on the couple in the doorway.

Vince Kemper stood tall and arrogant against the far wall, smoking a cheroot. He wore a black suit. If he noticed Sutton at all he gave no sign. Lascomb had worked his way through the silent crowd until he stood beside Kemper as if to let everyone see where his loyalty lay.

Myra had been chatting with some women near the musician's platform. As the silence spread through the big room she looked about to see Sutton and the girl entering the hall. Angrily she moved to Kemper's side and tried to pull him onto the dance floor. But he shook his head.

Then he turned his arrogant gaze on Sutton, as if for the first time aware of his presence. His left arm slipped around Myra's slender waist, drawing her against him. He raised his right hand in a mock salute.

His voice cut sharply through the silence. "These folks came here tonight for a little fun, Sutton. If there's any trouble it'll be your doing, not mine."

The crowd seemed to relax. The hard-pressed banjo player nodded to his two musicians and stomped his foot. The strains of a waltz erased what was left of the tension.

Sutton danced with Elly. She was light in his arms. Whenever he turned his head to nod to a friend he was aware that Myra was glaring at him.

When the music stopped and Sutton started to lead Elly from the floor, he saw Kemper and Myra standing with their backs to the wall right in front of them.

Kemper said to Elly, "You cost me a lot. Tonight I wanted to dance with my future bride. But—" His arm tightened about Myra's waist. They had been standing in this spot, not dancing.

Now Kemper said to Elly, "You've got a vicious dog. If I catch him alone, I'm going to shoot him."

When Sutton started forward, Elly got him by the arm and forcibly dragged him back on the floor. They drew abreast of the table that held the punchbowl, and Elly said she wanted a drink. She fanned her flushed, pretty face with a handkerchief.

With a shaking hand, Sutton filled two cups, passed one of them to Elly. "Kemper's taken a dislike to Gringo. Why?"

Elly lowered her eyes. "The day I was at Kemper's ranch, trying to sell—" her voice faltered—"he tried to kiss me."

Sutton's smile was instant. "And Gringo bit him." He looked across the room at Kemper, laughing.

"On the leg," Elly said.

"No wonder he isn't dancing." Then he sobered and flexed his right leg. It was still stiff from the splinter he had got from the boardwalk during his battle with River. "At least we'll be even if we fight. His leg and mine."

She looked up at him, concerned. "Does it hurt, Jim?"

"Not too much."

RUEL CANNISTER'S tall form edged through the crowd. He wore a plaid shirt and whipcord pants. His boots were polished. There was an unusual tautness about his angular face. He nodded at Sutton and bowed when Elly was introduced.

Cannister looked at Sutton. "You were right. Kemper gave me an ultimatum about fencing off Red Gap. It's fight or run."

Sutton could not help but remember the scene on the rancher's porch when he had asked for help and been turned down.

"Better be careful, Ruel," Jim Sutton said, and inclined his head toward Lascomb who stood talking to Kemper. "Lascomb has gone over to Kemper's side. You can't afford to have Lascomb down on you."

Ruel frowned. "I don't have to worry about Lascomb. I got his letter just before I came to town for the dance. I've been fired. Kemper is going to manage his holdings."

Sutton looked at the tall, rawboned rancher who had come to this corner of

Arizona seeking peace. He hadn't found it.

"I'm sorry, Ruel," he said.

He knew Cannister had been using the money Lascomb paid him to stock his own ranch. Now he might be caught with a shortage of funds to see him through next winter.

Cannister said, "Don't feel sorry for me. I'm glad it's over." He looked at Elly. "Is this the young lady you were telling me about?"

Sutton felt his cheeks grow warm. "Yes," he said.

Elly looked at him and then at Cannister. The rancher gave her a slow smile. "Jim thinks I ought to get married."

Elly's eyes darkened. "Does he now?"

Cannister and the girl moved to the dance floor. Sutton saw her watching him from over Cannister's shoulder.

A card game had started in a big room at the far end of the hall. Sutton had seen Lascomb and Kemper and some of the stag line disappear through the doors.

Myra moved to Sutton's side, her hips swaying beneath the folds of her gray dress. "I thought you'd ask me for a dance," she said, trying to smile. "You didn't, so now I'm asking you."

She lifted her arms and there was nothing he could do but dance with her.

He saw Elly watching him, her face grave and a little angry.

Myra said against his shoulder, "I'm sorry the way things worked out, Jim."

"Maybe it's good we found out about each other before it was too late."

She lifted her head to peer up at him. "Just what do you mean?"

"I'm a man who avoids a fight if he can. You don't like that in a man."

"And what about me?"

HE MADE no reply. When they had made a circuit of the floor he realized that everyone was looking their way. Then the crowd would look at the doorway through which Kemper had gone.

Myra said, "I like Vince. He's rough and crude. But there'll never be anyone like you." When he made no reply, she said, "Vince excites me."

"The excitement agrees with you. I've never seen you look better."

She looked up at him again. "I had to be sure, Jim. Don't you understand? I'm different than most women."

He said bitterly, "You were content to wait until marriage to find out about me. But with Vince Kemper it was different."

She said, "It was worth it, Jim. Now I know it isn't Kemper. It's you."

He laughed "You tried the fire and it burned your fingers."

She said hoarsely, "I'm asking you again. Take me away, Jim. Now."

He shook his head. "You were content to let me dangle until you thought I'd found someone else."

He let his eyes stray to Elly who still danced with Cannister Then he looked at Myra.

"You're a jealous woman. When you've got a man boxed you don't want him. It's only when you think somebody else might want him—"

She slapped him across the face. Whirling, she left him alone on the dance floor. The music broke off. Couples edged away. In the doorway to the cardroom Vince Kemper stood rattling a handful of poker chips.

Myra cried, "He insulted me, Vince," and flung a hand at Sutton who stood rigid in the center of the floor.

Kemper said easily, "I doubt that, Myra," and turned back into the room.

Sutton frowned, seeing Myra trembling in anger. Kemper's actions puzzled him. It was a perfect chance for a showdown. Kemper hadn't taken it up. No matter what Kemper was, Sutton had to admit, at least he was smart enough not to let Myra edge him into a trap. Whatever Kemper's game might be he was keeping it hidden.

SUTTON did not have long to speculate, for at that moment two shots rang out in the lot next to the hall. He saw Elly moving swiftly toward him, her face white.

Then there was a pounding of boots on the steps. Lee Burnap staggered into the hall, clutching the edge of the long table for support.

He pointed a finger at Elly who had come to stand at Sutton's side. "They're trying to kill your dog."

Sutton moved quickly. He got Burnap by an arm. "Who's doing it?"

"Huck River," Burnap said, and slid to the floor as his legs went out from under him. Only then did Sutton notice that the left side of Burnap's shirt was stained a deep red. Sutton was aware of a deep anger.

He jerked the revolver from his waist band. As he turned to the door, Elly tried to grab him. "Don't walk out there, Jim. That's what River wants."

But Sutton shook her off. He went down the stairs. In the hall above he heard the chatter of excited voices and the scrape of boots as the crowd broke for the windows to peer down into the lot.

He limped a little as he crossed the front of the hall and then stepped into the vacant lot next door where teams and saddlers were setting up a racket, frightened from the firing.

The men who had been here when he entered the hall with Elly were either gone or had moved into the deeper shadows. In a pool of light thrown out by the upstairs windows, he found Gringo. The black dog lay limp on the dusty ground. The bullet had cut a furrow through the coarse black hair atop his skull.

Huck River said from the shadows, "Over here, Sutton."

Sutton turned, seeing River, one arm bandaged from the pool cue that had pierced his shoulder. At his side stood Red Carmody. He seemed to have recovered completely from the blow of the whisky bottle against the back of his head.

Jim was aware of a dryness in his throat; the slow hammerbeat of his heart. So this was it. Kemper knew that River and Carmody were figuring to get him down here in the lot. Finish him off while Kemper stayed upstairs and was not forced to dirty his hands in front of the crowd.

The presence of Gringo had been a stroke of luck. River had shot him and when Lee Burnap had tried to interfere had shot him also.

River said, "You're a tough man with your fists. Let's see how tough you are with a gun."

Sutton took a deep breath. He couldn't get both of them, so he concentrated on River. Red Carmody was stepping aside, away from River. The man drew his gun as Sutton fired.

He was frankly amazed when he saw Huck River knock against the building. Then River was dropping, his head even with his knees. In the moment before River fell, Sutton turned, expecting to feel the smash of Carmody's bullet. But Carmody's scream was harsh against the crash of a gun. He spun, fell across River's body.

Then Sutton turned. Ruel Cannister stood at a corner of the building. The tall rancher said, "Did he get you, Jim?" Sutton shook his head, aware that his knees were shaking. Stiffly he walked back to the entrance, as Cannister said, "I was a little late with my help. But I'm glad now that I'm on your side of the fence."

JIM SUTTON climbed the stairs. Elly rushed to him. They had laid Lee Burnap out on a long table. In that moment he saw Burnap give him a tired smile.

Against the far wall were Myra and her father. In the entrance to the cardroom Kemper stood jiggling a handful of poker chips. Now he dropped them on the floor as Sutton pushed Elly aside and began to walk toward him.

Elly cried, "Don't, Jim. You've been lucky so far. Don't crowd your luck."

The tense and silent crowd looked on.

From the lot next door somebody yelled that Huck River was dead, Carmody dying.

Sutton halted a few feet from Kemper. He saw Kemper's eyes waver.

Then Sutton said, "You're just like Matt Lascomb. In the old days I hear he had some boys around him like River and Carmody. When they're gone it leaves a man kind of alone, doesn't it, Kemper?"

Vince Kemper swallowed. He wiped the palms of his hands on his pants and crossed the dance floor.

Sutton looked at Myra, seeing something

in her eyes he had never seen there before. She said, "I was a fool, Jim. A bigger fool than I ever realized."

Kemper was at the head of the stairs when she spoke. Now he turned quickly, his face livid, as if her words had drained him of his last ounce of caution. As he spun he brought up a gun.

But Jim Sutton was waiting. He shot him twice. Kemper's body clattered down the long stairway. Then for a moment there was silence before the crowd broke and hurried down after him.

With Elly's arm about his waist, Sutton went down the stairs and into the lot. It took only a glance to see that Kemper was dead. A crowd had formed around the two bodies at the side of the building. Across the lot was another group of men.

Sutton heard a deep-throated growl and quickened his pace. He broke through the crowd. Gringo still lay stretched out, but his tail was stirring.

Ruel Cannister said, "The bullet only grazed him. But he won't let us lift him."

Sutton bent down and picked up the dog.

"Use my wagon," Cannister said. "I'm staying here. Lascomb wants to talk to me."

Sutton gave him a slow smile. "I was telling you that you ought to get married." He laid Gringo in the wagon bed. "Lascomb needs a good son-in-law. Life is too tough for him alone. Maybe—"

"We'll see," Cannister said, and turned to look at Gorland's Hall and Myra's face framed in one of the windows.

Now Sutton climbed into the wagon, wincing at the soreness in his leg. Elly climbed in beside him. The crowd had moved up and they stood silently around the wagon. For a long moment he looked at them, then he set the team moving across the lot.

"Funny," he said, "but you've got to kill a man to gain respect in this town."

"No, Jim," Elly said. "You were right and they were wrong. They're shamed to think that you had to fight their battles."

"I didn't fight alone. There was Lee Burnap and Cannister."

"And me," she said, hanging onto his arm. "You've got a bad leg. I've seen how you limp. I could nurse you if you got blood poisoning."

"I'm all right."

"But supposing you did. You'd need somebody around the house to cook and—"

Something stirred in the wagon bed. Gringo had rolled over and was watching him. Sutton reached back and patted him.

Elly said, "Of course, a woman couldn't nurse a man unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they were married."

"You're sure hoping I'll get blood poisoning."

She still clung to his arm. "It's only a possibility. But we ought to be prepared."

He seemed deep in thought. "You'd have to give up trying to be a female drummer. No more traipsing around."

She gave a deep sigh. "It would be hard, Jim. But somehow I'd manage."

He looked down, aware that she was laughing at him. When he found her lips she no longer laughed.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

MOVIE NEWS COMING UP IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A review of Paramount's

SON OF PALEFACE

featuring

BOB HOPE ★ JANE RUSSELL ★ ROY ROGERS

Plus a Word-and-Picture Personality Sketch of JEFF CHANDLER

OUT OF THE CHUTES

LITTLE BRITCHES didn't know he was going to perform in the Fourth of July roundup until he heard the man with the megaphone call out his name and Hi Beckman's for an exhibition of matched pair riding.

He was so astonished that another cowboy had to pick him up by the hind end of his chaps and put him in the saddle. And it was a lucky thing that his horse, Sky High, knew all the tricks, because Little Britches was so mixed up he couldn't help much. But he came to toward the end when he and Hi Beckman on their two blue roans came toward the grandstand, changing lead so it looked as if both horses were dancing. Then Hi said, "Grab your hat off, Little Britches, when you see me grab mine."

The people in the stands shouted and cheered, but all Little Britches could think of was that he wished Father could have been there to see it.

That was the first time ten-year-old Ralph Moody ever performed for an audience, but most all the rodeo events were as familiar to him as milking the cows or feeding the chickens.

Unless you grew up in ranching country you'll probably never understand what a big part of a boy's life riding, roping and bronc-busting can be. But you might come pretty close if you read a couple of books by this same Ralph Moody, *Little Britches* and *Man of the Family*, published by Norton.

When Ralph was eight, his family came to Colorado from New Hampshire, because of his father's poor health and because they'd been promised a good life farming on shares. Little Britches was enchanted with his new life from the moment he arrived, but the first sight of their new home, a broken-down shack on a barren-looking section of land, was nearly enough to send the Moodys back to New England.

After five years, Little Britches had been a cowpoke, a jockey, a businessman, a sort of trail boss, and the second-best trick rider in the county. The best, of course,was the cowboy, Hi Beckman, who taught him.

It was Hi who swung him up behind his saddle one day, and they went down the trail like thunder with Little Britches digging his fingers in under Hi's cartridge belt. That was the youngster's first ride, and it gave him enough courage to try some riding on his own—on a donkey that one of the other boys rode to school. It was a regular thing for the boys to ride the donkey after they'd eaten their lunches.

When it was Little Britches' turn, he says, "I wasn't very much afraid. I hadn't fallen off the cowboy's horse, and thought I could cut the mustard. My ride lasted about half the donkey's first jump. He kicked his heels up, and I pitched off between his ears."

A few days later the boys gave Ralph another try and some help. "They got straps off one of the harnesses and a piece of good stout cord. After they'd buckled the straps real tight around the donkey, Rudy held him by the ears while Willie put me on and tied my feet together with the cord. He ran it snug between them, under the donkey's belly. Willie told me not to be scared, to squeeze tight with my knees and watch the donkey's head so I could lean way back when he put it down to kick. I grabbed hold of the straps with both hands and Rudy let him go.

"For what seemed an hour, but was probably ten seconds, things were happening too fast for me to keep up with them. I tried to watch his head and lean back every time it went down, but it was bobbing

so fast I lost the beat. My head snapped back and forth as though it were tied on with rubber, and I bit my tongue—but I was still on top when he stopped.

Little Britches learned to ride the horses around his father's little ranch—there were never more than three or four and they were workhorses—and that summer he became a sort of cowboy. A neighbor paid him twenty-five cents a day to herd about thirty milch cows, which was mostly a matter of keeping them out of other neighbors' grain fields.

BY THE time the next summer came along he was riding well enough to be offered a job on the Y-B spread. True, his main job was to help the Mexican cook and to carry water to the cowboys out on the range, but he was allowed to pick his own horse out of the corral.

He picked a blue roan because he looked like Hi Beckman's horse and because none of the other cowboys wanted that one. He'd never have got him broke, though, by himself. In fact, the ranch owner insisted that Hi "wear the maverick down before you let this little daredevil fork him."

After seeing Hi try to lead the roan on a rope around the corral, the rancher called to Hi, "Ain't you seen enough yet? That maverick will never be a kid's horse?"

Hi answered, "No I ain't, and you ain't seen the kid ride. You got two surprises coming."

That made Little Britches feel pretty good and absolutely determined to ride the horse himself. But that was before he saw Hi try to ride him.

"The roan colt stood for maybe ten seconds as though he were cut out of stone, and Hi sat just as still. Then the colt shot off as if a trigger had been pulled somewhere inside of him. I had thought I could ride a bronco, but it was only because I didn't know any better. The blue didn't buck straight out, and he didn't spin or circle. His first leap took his front hoofs ten feet off the ground, and they came down like pile drivers. He bounced to the right, smashed down, snapped to the left, and went up again like a geyser."

After a brutal ride the colt quieted down some, and it was Little Britches' turn.

"Hi told me the colt would buck again with a new rider, but not so hard. He told me not to be afraid, but to keep myself pulled up tight against the pommel with the hackamore rope, and to keep my eyes on the roan's ears so I'd know which way he was fixing to jump. . . .

"When I was set, Hi wheeled his horse away and I was on my own. The colt bogged his head, leaped and thudded down. From there on I don't know much about it except what they told me afterwards. But I do know that he didn't buck with me the way he did with Hi, or I'd have gone flying. When it was over Hi came riding in to take me off, but I didn't want to. I was so dizzy I could only see a blur, and I couldn't make words come out of my mouth.

"Hi knew what I wanted, though. He said, 'You're damn right, you're going to get to ride him. Open the gate, Len!' His blue never left my side more than three feet all the way across the alfalfa field, out over a strip of prairie and back to the corral. On the way back the colt wasn't fighting. I could feel the smooth power of his muscles under the saddle, and I knew he was going to be my horse."

He called his horse Sky High, and Hi renamed his Sky Blue, and together they won the trick riding at the Littleton Roundup. Hi also won the bronc-busting, and Little Britches helped support his widowed mother and his brothers and sisters by riding in the rodeo races and winning.

Little Britches also organized his schoolmates to help cattlemen drive steers through town. He was so good at it that on some occasions he was allowed to boss everybody—even the regular trail-drivers—until the herd reached the town limits. And all by himself he drove a herd of cows fifty-five miles—starting with thirteen head and ending up with twenty-three.

But these are other stories—and good ones. You'll find them, and more, in Ralph Moody's two fine books about his boyhood, *Little Britches* and *Man of the Family.*

Adios,
THE EDITORS

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF VIRGO
AUG. 23 to SEPT. 22

QUIET and cautious, the man of Virgo has inner resources of strength sufficient to meet any emergency. He is never one to make a splash, seldom brags, and hates being made conspicuous. But he is always there when you need him.

The Virgo man may not steal the spotlight the way the personality boys do, but his charm improves with time, as certain other types do not.

Men born under this sign are planners, and consequently avoid the temptation to put the cart before the horse. They venture a gamble only after careful consideration of the odds, and then they win.

Even in matters of the heart, the man born under Virgo is sometimes systematic and methodical. He will plan a campaign to win the girl of his dreams, and often carries it out step by step. He strives to remember birthdays and anniversaries, and this trait makes him more popular than his less considerate rivals.

The true son of Virgo has a great capacity for detailed work, and remarkable powers of concentration. Nothing irritates him more than to be distracted by trivial interruptions when he is deeply engrossed in his work.

With an intense desire for perfection, the Virgo man must remember that criticism of others is most helpful when it is constructive.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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Sheep Heiress

By Frank C. Robertson

THE STORY SO FAR:

In need of money for his ranch on Rock River, BURR CHANDLER is turned down for a loan by CLAUDE PICKARD, bank manager. Pickard is in partnership with VERNE HULL, to buy out the tremendous sheep ranch from lovely DALE EUSTACE. Burr finds that the LEATHERWOODS—GEORGE, DICK and ANNIE—are being blackmailed by a murder charge against Dick into selling their Seventy Ranch to Pickard and Hull. Since the Leatherwoods are the only other big cattle ranchers, their selling will bring sheep on their common range and ruin Burr. When Dale learns of the range situation, she decides not to sell, and then offers the Leatherwoods a fair price. In spite of this, they finally sell low to Pickard and Hull. Then Pickard and Hull, desperate to get Dale's ranch, bribe a sheep inspector who tells Dale her sheep have the dread scabies. Dale realizes she has to sell, but Burr, after investigating, says he doesn't think there's any scab, and Dale goes to the state capital for another inspector. Back at his ranch, Burr finds one of his riders has been killed. Burr, George and some neighboring ranchers force a confession from a Seventy rider who says this killing, and the murder Dick was framed for, were done by a Hull man. Furious now, Burr and a couple of friends confront Hull and charge him with the two murders. Though Burr tries to beat the truth out of Hull, he is stopped by the sheriff—who arrests him for starting a riot

CONCLUSION

FOR THE first time in his life Burr found himself behind bars. Still, the satisfaction of having beaten Verne Hull to a pulp was worth it. But he realized that his foes would never rest until they had his life. Their crookedness was now out in the open, and while he was far from being able to prove his charges, there were many people who would believe them.

Just before sundown the sheriff unlocked his cell. "You're free to go now," the officer said grudgingly. "You're out on five hundred dollars bail, and you'd better behave yourself."

"Did Posey put up my bail?" Burr asked.

"No, he had to be bailed out himself. Fellow named Ivan Butts put it up."

"Butts?" Burr said wonderingly.

"He's waiting to talk to you."

Ivan Butts came forward and shook Burr's hand when he reached the sheriff's office. I'm Dale Eustace's bookkeeper," he explaned. "She would like to see you over at her office."

Burr thought that he might have known it. No one else in Chub Springs, except Posey Mitchell, would have gone his bail.

DALE WAS smiling as she shook hands with Burr and invited him to have a chair. Ivan Butts retired discreetly to his own office. "You're quite a wild man, I hear," she said. "They claim you wrecked the Mission Saloon and put Verne Hull in the hospital."

"I'm obliged to you for going my bail. I think they have bugs in their bunks at that jail."

"I was glad to do it, but I'm afraid you may be in serious trouble. Claude Pickard claims you accused him of conspiring at murder and blackmail, and he's going to file charges of slander. If you can't disprove them you know what will happen."

"In that case I'd have to prove them."

"But can you?"

"Not yet. We got the whole story from a boy they bought, but he had a rope around his neck at the time, or nearly so, and I don't think he would stick to it."

Dale eyed him for a minute in silence. "You, I think, are a barbarian," she said. "A primitive brute of the male species. A throwback to the stone age or something." Her eyes didn't indicate that she was displeased.

"If that were wholly true," he answered, "there's something else I'm liable to do."

"And that is—"

"Grab my woman by the hair and drag her off to my lair."

"But I understand she is married. Would that be advisable?"

Burr decided to change the subject, for the conversation suddenly was distasteful. It was not at all improbable that he would have to kill Claude Pickard, and people might think that a woman was at the bottom of it.

"Was your trip successful?" he asked

"I don't know. Two inspectors came back with me as far as Topaz. They got off there to cut across the hills, without this man Bywater knowing anything about it. They may be back here tomorrow."

"That's really good news," he said. "I only hope they don't bump into the same herder I did." He told her then about finding the dead cow and being shot at, and about Rube Walcott and some of the old herders being fired.

Dark anger crossed Dale's face. "I'll see about that," she said. "I still own those sheep, and I'll give myself the pleasure of rehiring those men and firing Austin Tewkes."

"If I were you," he said urgently, "I'd stay off the range, at least until you know whether or not you're going to sell. You could be in personal danger, you know. Your heirs might prove more reasonable about selling than you are."

Dale knew that was a fact, but she said stubbornly, "Nobody can stop me from going where I want to."

"Look: I hired Rube Walcott, and the first thing he did was get his head busted trying to save my life, which he probably did. I'll loan him back to you. Promise me not to ride on the range unless you take Rube with you. He's a good man," he urged.

Burr continued to argue until finally she agreed. "But I still think you are the one who needs a bodyguard," she insisted.

The last clash with Verne Hull had accomplished nothing, and it meant, as Dale had said, that his foes would declare open season upon him. He knew just enough now to make his enemies resort to anything to keep him from learning more.

His concern over Dale was genuine, especially if bribery and collusion, in connection with the alleged sheep disease, were proved. Nothing then could help Pickard and Hull so much as her death, and they had already proved that murder bothered them not at all.

HE SAW Rube Walcott the next morning, and though Rube's head was bandaged, he professed himself all right. Burr explained what his new duties were to be, and then headed back for the range. Dale had agreed to wait until the return of the two state inspectors before going out on the range, so Rube had nothing to do except keep an eye on the Eustace barn.

Burr was anxious to get back to camp. Although he had given Bob and Rod strict orders to stay together, he feared that one of them might get picked off by Cowdery or some other sniper.

Now he kept to the timber well above the sheep. He saw five horses in front of the cow camp when he came in sight, and identified three of them as Seventy horses. He thought little of it until he was seen, and Bob Oliver waved for him to hurry. He ran his horse the rest of the distance and left the saddle before the horse came to a halt.

"What's wrong, Bob?" he asked.

"It's Lafe Hargood. He's in the tent—dying."

"My God, did one of you—"

"It wasn't us. Bill Cowdery shot him. He can't last long."

Burr needed but one glance at Hargood to know that the puncher was dying. A rifle bullet had entered his abdomen and torn a ragged hole through his side. The horrible fear of death was in the youth's eyes as he looked up piteously. Hargood tried to talk, but strangled on the words.

"What did he say?" Bob demanded of the others. Besides his own men, Bob and Rod, Dick Leatherwood and Cube Bremer were present. They all started to speak at once, till Burr told them to let Bob do the talking.

"Seems he rode over to Cuthbert's place after he left us. Last night Earl and Louie Cuthbert got back from Chub Springs and told their old man something that got 'im all excited, but they didn't let Lafe know what it was. Bill Cowdery was there. This morning Cuthbert told Lafe that Verne Hull had sent word for him to go back to the Seventy ranch.

"Lafe couldn't make up his mind for a while, but he finally decided to do it. He says Bill Cowdery had left at daylight. Lafe was riding around the foot of Grave Creek Butte when this bullet hit him. He managed to hang onto the horn and get his horse to a run. He was shot at a couple more times, but the bullets didn't hit. He got a look at the man, and it was Cowdery."

Sheer misery went through Burr. Indirectly, he was responsible for the tragedy. He had spoken of Hargood in the Mission Saloon, and the Cuthbert brothers had ridden back and told their father and Cowdery, and Lafe's death had been decided upon.

"I'm sorry, Lafe," he murmured inadequately.

"I'd have got it sooner or later," Hargood managed to say. "I been an awful fool."

The man couldn't last long. Burr took a memorandum book from his pocket and wrote rapidly the things Hargood had confessed previously, and the account of his ambush. When finished, he knelt beside the dying man and read what he had written.

"Is that correct, Lafe?" he asked.

The man nodded.

"Can you sign it?"

"I—I'll try."

Burr lifted him up and put the pencil in his hand. Lafe made several meaningless marks, then, with a desperate effort, steadied himself and wrote his name plainly

enough for it to be identified as his signature. He was dead within a minute after Burr laid him down.

Burr signed his own name as a witness, and each of the others did the same. Whether or not it would stand up in court Burr didn't know, but it was the first tangible evidence he had got against Verne Hull and the man who killed for him, Bill Cowdery.

He folded the paper, which had been stained by a drop of Lafe Hargood's blood, and put it in his pocket.

"You fellows stay here and keep out of trouble," he told them. "I was shot at by a crazy sheepherder, so don't take any chances. I've got to go back to town."

"I'm going with you," Dick Leatherwood said.

"I'm not asking you, and I think you'd better stay," Burr told him.

"I'm going. I caused this whole rotten mess, and it's time I did something besides run," Dick declared.

Burr made no further objection. It was time, perhaps, for Dick to assert his manhood.

CLAUDE PICKARD was a badly worried man. He had plotted long and carefully to make himself king of the sheep country, and his progress had been rapid.

He had crushed several people in his mad rush to riches, and he expected to crush more. He had put his wife in her place after her infatuation for him had caused her to give him complete control of her money. He had ruined the Leatherwood brothers, and Burr Chandler was on his last financial legs. Dale Eustace would still be a rich woman, but he could congratulate himself that he would get her property for much less than its real value.

After things settled down he would have no further use for his partner, Verne Hull. He had no doubt of his ability to take care of Hull when the time came. And, finally, he meant to go after the giant of them all, old Jacques Duclos. When Duclos died Pickard intended that his money should come to him.

But right now things were not going the way he wanted. To his utter surprise, for he was a vain man, Leona had threatened him with divorce and a lawsuit to regain control of her money. The money was tied up so that she couldn't get it, even if she got a divorce, but it was an annoyance nevertheless.

The man Chandler was proving much tougher than Pickard had expected. He had gotten a real scare when the sheriff informed him that Chandler had forced a confession out of Lafe Hargood. The sheriff had pooh-poohed the whole story, but Claude knew it meant that Hargood would have to be silenced one way or another, and murder was a dangerous business. If it had to be done he meant to stay in the clear and let Verne Hull take the responsibility.

But his worst worry now was a belief that Dale Eustace was stalling, and until he got title to the Eustace property his dreams would be unrealized. Her trip to the state capital had bothered him, for he had gone to the station immediately after her departure to find out her destination. He had called her several times after her return, but she had told him she was still awaiting her lawyer's report, and he didn't believe it.

The fight in the saloon in which Burr Chandler had openly hurled the charge of murder against him and Hull had warned him how critical things had become.

When he reached home one evening he found that Leona had returned from attending Ford Parnell's funeral. There was no longer any demonstration of affection between them. He merely grunted, "About time you were getting back. You know I can't stand restaurant cooking."

"You're going to have to stand a lot more of it, I'm afraid, unless you get a new cook," she replied. "I'm going to sue for a divorce."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that you are a criminal," she shot back. "And I've got the evidence."

His voice became wary. "What evidence?"

"That you got a check made out to Dick Leatherwood by Mark Lawrence and raised it to ten times what it was made out for," she shot back.

Pickard laughed, as if in relief. "But you haven't got the check," he said before he thought.

"But I have. Mr. Lawrence was kind enough to let me have it."

HIS HANDS curved into claws and he almost had her by the throat before he recovered his composure. "You dirty little spy," he said contemptuously. "I never saw that check, and I can prove it. Leatherwood raised it and gave it to Verne Hull to pay a gambling debt. Hull presented it to Jack Talcomb, and Jack cashed it for him."

Leona was disconcerted for only a moment. "There was plenty of time for Hull to let you work on it before it was cashed."

"You give me that check before I wring that pretty neck of yours," he said angrily.

"I wouldn't give it to you if you killed me, and it's hidden where you'll never find it," she said defiantly.

"And you think you can use it to blackmail me into giving you a divorce?"

"I want the divorce, and I want my money back—every cent of it. And I insist that you sell Seventy back to the Leatherwoods for just what you gave for it."

"Look, my dear, I assure you that you're all wrong. I never saw that check. Furthermore, there is a law that a wife can't testify against her husband. You start any action you care to. I'm going up town."

He took his hat and walked out of the house, leaving Leona more than a little uncertain.

Mr. Lawrence had told her she could keep the check for a few days, but he would want it back. She had to be sure that Claude couldn't find it. She had hidden it in a sugar can in the kitchen, but that wasn't safe enough. She wondered desperately where she could put it.

She was afraid to leave it with any attorney in Chub Springs. She ran to the window and watched her husband until he disappeared up the street. Then she wrote a note to her brother Fred, addressed an envelope, got the check from the sugar can and put it, with the comparative figures and writing in Claude's hand, into the envelope and sealed it.

The post office building was across the street from the Mission and she dared not take the chance of Claude's seeing her. She ran into a neighbor's house and gave a twelve-year-old girl a quarter to mail the letter. She didn't rest easy until the girl returned and told her the letter had been mailed.

PICKARD was far from sure that his bluff had worked, but he had no other choice. Now he went to Verne Hull's room over the Mission. Since the fight with Chandler, Hull was keeping to his bed.

Claude climbed the stairs and entered his partner's room. Pickard had given Hull the devil for letting Burr Chandler get away alive, and Hull was still grouchy.

"If you've come to bawl me out again you can leave," Hull said. "I'm getting tired of doing all the work and taking all the abuse."

"I appreciate what you've done, Verne," Pickard said smoothly. "But don't forget I'm putting up most of the money."

"Has the big deal gone through yet?" Hull asked.

"Not yet, but I think we'll close it tomorrow. Right now I've got other troubles." He told Hull about his interview with Leona.

"We've got to destroy that check," he finished.

"Got to get it first, ain't you?" Hull asked.

"Right. And I know how to do it. The county attorney is my friend. I'll have him ask Lawrence for the check for a pretended investigation. Lawrence will then demand it from Leona, and she'll give it up."

"Then what?"

"Then Lawrence's butcher shop burns down. . . ."

Leona had breakfast ready the next morning when her husband arose, but she refused to speak. "Well, when am I going

to be arrested for forgery, my dear?" he said in a teasing manner.

"I'll give you a few days to think it over," she said icily.

"Fine," he laughed, "but you won't have to wait that long. I've already asked the county attorney to conduct an investigation. I expect Mr. Lawrence will be after the check this afternoon."

He was pleased to note that Leona looked a great deal more worried than he felt. But one of these days, he promised himself, Leona was going to meet with an accident, a fatal one.

In the bank that morning he started several times to call Dale Eustace on the telephone, but each time restrained himself. It would be better to make her call.

Then his phone rang, and Dale was on the wire. "I wonder if you and your partner can come over to my office right away?" she asked.

"Surely," he replied, "we'll be there in twenty minutes."

Claude stopped at the Mission only long enough to pick up his partner. "It's all set," he said. "After today there'll be nothing to do except clean up. This country is ours."

THERE was a queer look on old Ivan Butts's face when he let them in. Claude made a mental note to fire the old man as soon as he officially took over.

"Just go right in," Butts told them.

Pickard was not surprised to see Ed Jamison, the local attorney for the Eustace interests, but he was puzzled by the presence of two strangers in leather coats and corduroys.

"Come in, gentlemen," Dale invited. "I want you to meet these gentlemen from the state land and livestock office: Mr. Cutler and Mr. Hayes."

Pickard felt a little ice up his spine, but he said heartily, "Glad to meet you, gentlemen."

The strangers nodded.

Dale said, "Mr. Cutler is superintendent of the state livestock inspection service, and Mr. Hayes is his assistant. They've been looking over our sheep."

Pickard hated Verne Hull at that moment for the green look that came over his face, and didn't realize that he had paled himself. "Why, that's fine," he said heartily. "I guess you know that the scabies are pretty bad on our range."

"Not so bad as you might think," Cutler said. "In fact, I'm at a loss as to why Bywater quarantined so many of Miss Eustace's herds. As a matter of fact we failed to find a single case of scab on the range."

"Well, that is good news," Pickard said.

"Is it?" Cutler asked tonelessly. "We learned that one yearling herd was mixed with some Basque's herd that had a few scabby sheep, but no trace of the disease has developed yet. We have quarantined that yearling band up in a rocky canyon where they can stay until they are dipped a couple of times, and we've lifted the quarantine on the rest of the range."

Pickard felt as if there was a leaden weight in his stomach. He knew now why Dale had gone to the capital, and he saw a range empire slipping out of his grasp.

He said, "I can't understand it. Bywater assured us there was a lot of scab."

"And I can't understand Bywater, unless he was bribed to make that report," Cutler announced. "Anyway, he's through with the service from now on."

"I don't know who would want to bribe him," Pickard said.

Dale said bluntly, "You two stood to profit seventy-five thousand dollars by it."

"You signed a contract," Pickard said. "This doesn't affect its legality."

"It completely negates it," Attorney Jamison said. "Miss Eustace's agreement plainly was obtained by fraud."

"She'll go through with the deal, or we'll sue for damages," Pickard shouted.

"I hardy think you will," Jamison said calmly, "but if you wish, go ahead and sue."

Bluffing here would do no good, and Pickard knew it. Bywater was as weak as water, and he was sure to confess taking bribe money when questioned. The big dream had collapsed. He wouldn't get the sheep, and now Leona was likely to get her money back, and if she were not stopped, the Seventy might be lost. Jacques Duclos

was sure to fire him from the bank, and he would be right where he started— except that he might face the penitentiary.

"Come on, Verne," he said, "we're getting out of here."

Hull didn't speak until they were on the street. "Now what's the big brain got to say?" he demanded.

"I say we're not licked yet, but there's got to be some drastic action."

"Such as burning down butcher shops," Hull sneered.

"Right. And getting rid of a certain gal who's got too much money for her own good."

Hull looked at his partner inquiringly, and Pickard said, "The old aunt who would inherit her property would be only too glad to sell out. Dale will be riding out on the range in a day or so. We've got to see that she doesn't come back. You get out there and see Cowdery, or do the job yourself."

BURR MADE his first stop at the Senate Saloon. It was dark enough by then for the lamps to be lighted. Rube Walcott came up from the back of the room as Burr leaned against the bar to talk to Posey Mitchell. Burr turned to speak to the former commissary man. "You didn't go to the range today?"

"Nope. Too much excitement right around here, but Dale says she's going out tomorrow."

"Excitement? What happened?"

"Dale brung in the chief inspector and he says there's no scab in the sheep. Lifted the quarantine for everything but one band of yearlings."

"Now that's what I call good news," Burr said. "What else?"

"She told off Pickard and Hull. Won't sell out to 'em."

That was the news Burr had been hoping for. No matter what the Seventy did now he could handle the range situation. He could deal with Dale.

He took out Lafe Hargood's blood-stained confession and laid it on the bar. Posey Mitchell read it aloud.

"Lafe didn't write this," Posey said.

"I wrote it, but he signed it," Burr said. "Maybe it won't hold up in law, but it'll make those two buzzards scratch."

"It should. What'll you do about it?"

"Take it to the sheriff. And I want you two to go along as witnesses, in case he might be tempted to lose it."

Posey turned his duties over to a bartender and got his hat. They found the sheriff at his own home, and Burr told him the circumstances of Hargood's death.

"This looks funny to me," Sheriff Smith said. "Hargood run away from you fellows because he was scared of you. Now you claim the friends he went to join murdered him, and he made his way back to your camp for help."

"Maybe you'd like to arrest me for the murder?" Burr challenged.

"I'm just keeping an open mind," the sheriff said. "This'll have to be investigated."

"Why else do you think I came here?"

"You're a trouble-maker, Chandler. I think I'd be justified in holding you."

"You do, and I'll promise the county gets a new sheriff," Posey said grimly.

The sheriff backed down a little. "I'll get the coroner and a posse and go out there. If Bill Cowdery is at Cuthbert's I'll ask him a few questions."

"Generous of you, Sheriff," Burr said.

They returned to the saloon. "I don't like it," Burr said. "If that dumb sheriff gets to Cowdery first we'll never see the fellow again. Smith is still working under the illusion that Claude Pickard is the big man in the country."

"I don't know what you can do about it," Posey said.

"I know what I'm going to try to do," Burr returned. "I'm going after Cowdery right now."

"I'll go with you," Rube offered.

"No, you won't. You keep an eye on Dale Eustace. Right now she can be in more danger than anybody."

Dick Leatherwood had said almost nothing until now. "I know that deadfall better than any of you," he said. "I'll side you, Burr."

Burr looked at the puncher curiously.

Dick had never been known for nerve, and technically at least he was still working for Pickard and Hull. Then too, he still had a sore head from the time Burr had rapped it with a belt buckle. It seemed rather foolish to trust him.

Leatherwood said, "I know what you're thinking—that I may still be sore at you, and just want a chance to tip off Cowdery and the Cuthberts. It ain't true. If you knew how close I've come to killing myself the last few weeks you'd know that I don't care a hell of a lot if somebody does down me. This may be the only chance I'll ever have to prove myself a man."

"All right, Dick, I'll take your word for it," Burr said.

"I ain't no hell of a horseman," Posey Mitchell said, "but this is something I want to be in on."

IT WAS after three o'clock in the morning when they came in sight of the deadfall on Windy Creek. The place was still. "When Cowdery is here he generally sleeps at that cabin in the back," Dick said.

They tied their horses close at hand and walked forward. Burr said, "You stay here, Dick, and watch the main buildings."

He asked Posey to remain just outside the door of the cabin Dick had indicated, then gently tried the door. It was not locked, and he went in.

With gun in one hand, he struck a match. The bunk at the far end of the cabin was empty.

Disappointed, Burr rejoined his companions. "Stay here, Dick, and watch the rear," he directed. "Posey and me will try the front."

The buildings were all of logs, low and strong. The saloon stretched across the front in one long room. Back of that was a storeroom and several smaller rooms in which drunks were tossed to sleep off their jags. The Cuthbert family lived in the south wing, while the collection of dancehall girls lived in the north wing, which also harbored a small dance floor.

The saloon was, of course, locked. Burr banged on the door with his gun and loudly demanded admission. It took five minutes of commotion before a voice shouted from the south wing, "Git away from there, you drunken herder, or I'll fill you full of buckshot."

"Open up," Burr yelled back. "We're from Chub Springs."

"Yeah? Who are you? What do you want?"

"Message from Claude Pickard," Burr answered.

A light presently appeared inside, the door was opened, and Sam Cuthbert himself stood there in bare feet and undershirt. Burr stepped inside and jammed his gun against the old man's belly.

"Where's Bill Cowdery?" Burr demanded.

"Cowdery? I dunno," the old man said.

"I'll just have a look around," Burr said. "Keep this old devil covered, Posey, and if anybody starts anything let him have it."

"Gladly," Posey said, and from under his coat produced a sawed-off shotgun he used to keep order inside the Senate.

"He ain't here," Cuthbert maintained. "No use gettin' everybody up."

"They'd better be up, because if I don't find where Cowdery is this whole shebang is going up in smoke, like it should have done long ago," Burr said grimly. "We don't want to burn anybody to death."

"Wait a minute," Cuthbert said. "If you won't wreck my place I'll tell you where he is."

"All right, but talk fast."

"I reckon he's over at the Eustace headquarters camp," Cuthbert said. "Verne Hull came after him a while ago, and they went away together."

Burr was disappointed, but he believed the man was telling the truth. Nevertheless, he wanted to make sure his man wasn't there. He went through both wings, arousing everyone and ordering them to go into the saloon.

When Earl and Louie came out of their bedroom, angrily wanting to know what was the matter, he told them, "Keep quiet and leave your guns behind. There's a shotgun against your old man, and if anybody starts anything he'll go down."

WITHIN ten minutes a motley crowd was gathered in the saloon. Cuthbert's wife, an angular, dark-complexioned woman with a strident voice, cursed steadily, but the rest were quiet and subdued.

Three or four bedraggled-looking dance-hall girls came in, wearing their sleazy nightgowns, and there were a few drunks from the back room who owlishly wondered what it was all about. A couple were too drunk to be aroused. But there was no sign of the murderer they sought.

Burr questioned the girls, but they were too frightened to say anything. Dick had come in from the back, and he asked to talk alone to one of the girls, whom he called Effie. When he returned he said the girl had admitted that Hull and Cowdery had left about midnight.

"All right," Burr said, "now listen, Cuthbert. We know that you helped frame Dick here, and once you killed a man. He wasn't the first man that's been killed here by any means. I'm coming back here one of these days and burn this rotten place to the ground. You and your people had better be gone."

"You can't bluff us," Earl Cuthbert said, and his mother screamed curses at Burr and his friends, but Sam Cuthbert himself, menaced by Posey's shotgun, said nothing.

They marched Cuthbert out to their horses for safety's sake, then mounted and rode away at a gallop. Dawn was coming now, and they had miles to cover before they reached the headquarters camp of the sheep outfit. . . .

They saw two men ride into the sheep camp just before they got there, and they hoped for a while it was the two they were looking for, but it wasn't. Burr recognized Austin Tewkes and a campmover.

They saw Tewkes go inside a tent and come out a moment later. The campmover and the new commissary man, a black-whiskered fellow with a scar running down his forehead from a white streak in his black hair, were a little to one side, and both men were armed.

Burr and his two companions reined up. Dick Leatherwood was badly scared and showed it, but Posey Mitchell was cool as a spring morning. The sawed-off shotgun lay across his lap.

Burr said, "We're looking for Verne Hull and Bill Cowdery. You know where they are?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," Tewkes said. "Verne is in Chub Springs, I reckon, and I ain't seen Cowdery for days."

"Nobody has, since he murdered Lafe Hargood," Burr snapped. "What about you, commissary man—you seen 'em?"

"Nope," the man answered.

He was standing beside the light wagon in which he hauled supplies from town, with one arm carelessly over the side of the wagon-bed. Burr was certain that there was a gun in that concealed hand, even though a sixgun was in plain sight in a holster.

AT THE same time a feeling came over him that there was somebody inside the tent. He moved his horse a little, and his eye fell on the stirrup of a saddle. The commissary man's saddled horse was tied to a tree a few rods away. He became certain now, but he didn't know whether there was one man or two.

The back of his neck felt icy cold, and he wondered if he looked as frightened as Dick Leatherwood. If the men he was looking for were in that tent, he was going to have a look at them if it cost him his life—and the stage was set for a massacre.

"That's mighty funny," he said. "We just came from Cuthbert's deadfall, and they told us Hull and Cowdery left there at midnight headed for this camp."

"We ain't seen 'em," Tewkes said stolidly.

"And I say you're a liar," Burr retorted. "Come out of that tent, Hull."

Everything exploded into action at once. Burr saw the arm of the commissary man come up from the wagon-bed with a rifle in his hand, and Tewkes and the campmover went for their guns. The same instant he saw the tent bulge, and the muzzle of a gun showed through a slit in the tent flap.

Burr's thought was to save the lives of the men with him. He spun his horse, hoping the man inside the tent might miss, although there was little chance of it, and he knew that he was the target.

Burr's hand had been on his gun, and his draw was fast. His shot caught the commissary man squarely in the chest. The man fell forward, the reflex action of his finger pulling the trigger, but the bullet went harmlessly into the ground.

Other guns were going off, but they were dimmed by the roar of the shotgun as Posey Mitchell let go with both barrels at the bulge in the tent, ripping a hole through it, and a bigger one through the body of the man stationed inside.

Burr felt the sting of a bullet fired by the man in the tent as it tore through the flesh just beneath his left armpit, missing his heart by two scant inches. He swung his horse the other way and saw Dick Leatherwood drifting from the saddle, and a smoking gun in Tewkes's hand.

Tewkes was directly in front of him, and Burr hit his horse hard with both spurs. The excited animal leaped blindly ahead, its shoulder colliding with Austin Tewkes and knocking the sheep foreman off his feet.

Posey Mitchell roared, "Drop that gun!" He had swung about, and the empty shotgun was pointed at the bewildered campmover, who hadn't yet fired a shot. Too scared to realize that the shotgun must be empty, he let his sixgun drop to the ground.

The battle was over in less than ten seconds. Burr leaped to the ground and kicked the gun out of Austin Tewkes's hand. The man lay groaning upon the ground, pretending to be more badly hurt than he was.

While Posey reloaded the shotgun Burr ran into the tent, gun in hand. Verne Hull lay in there with a great gaping hole in his chest, gasping out his last breath. But there was no sign of Bill Cowdery!

THREE MEN were dead or dying. Burr got to Dick Leatherwood as quickly as he could, and realized instantly that Dick had paid the supreme price for folly. His gun was in his hand, but he hadn't fired a shot.

Posey, the shotgun reloaded, lined Tewkes and the campmover up against the wagon. "Either of you moves a muscle, and I'll blast you into hell so fast the devil can't get the gate open," he warned them ferociously.

Burr knelt over Dick. "Is it bad, boy?" he asked, unable to keep the grief out of his voice.

"Don't hurt too much," Dick answered, "but I think I got it."

"You'll pull through," Burr said, trying to put across a conviction he didn't feel.

"No, Tewkes got me," Dick murmured. "If I hadn't been so scared—"

"So was I, Dick," Burr comforted.

"Look, you're hit," Dick said. "You're bleeding."

"It's not bad. I'll get you some water."

"No, wait. Tell me, did you get Verne Hull?"

"Posey got him. He's dead."

"Good. I don't feel so bad now. Burr—"

"Yes, Dick."

"Tell George and Annie—sorry—I'm no good. Tell 'em I didn't raise that check, nor—kill that sheepherder." His breathing was getting more and more labored.

"They already know it, Dick, but I'll tell 'em," Burr promised. "And I'll tell 'em you—I'll tell 'em you fought like a man."

Dick nodded as if with satisfaction, his head fell sideways and he was dead.

Burr folded the arms of the dead puncher across his breast and covered his face with his hat. He had met death like a man.

Burr turned his attention to Tewkes and the campmover. Tewkes was sullen, but the campmover quivered like an aspen leaf.

"Where's Bill Cowdery?" he demanded.

The campmover said, "He left here right after breakfast. I didn't hear everything, but I know Hull sent him out to kill somebody coming from Chub Springs."

Burr seized the shotgun from Posey and thrust the barrels against Tewkes's belly. "Tell me who it was, or I'll blow a bigger hole through you than is in Hull," he threatened.

"It was Dale Eustace," Tewkes answered fearfully. "They had an idea she'd be coming out here today."

"I thought so. Posey, can you manage here if I help you truss these rats?" Burr asked.

"I surely can," Posey said. "You help me tie 'em up and load the dead men in the wagon and I'll start for town."

It was quickly done. Before they were through, Austin Tewkes had broken completely and was begging them to say a good word for him at his trial if he would tell everything he knew.

BURR RAN his horse without mercy. Even before Tewkes had talked he had been certain whom Cowdery was laying for. He had been sure that Dale would lose no time getting out on the range to re-establish some kind of order. Rube Walcott would be along as her bodyguard, but there could be little defense against a murderer who would shoot from ambush.

He was perhaps ten miles along the road and his lathering horse was beginning to tire and choke up in its breathing, when he heard a shot. A cold dread went through him.

A moment later he heard a second shot, and this time he knew that it came from an aspen grove under the comb of a ridge two or three hundred yards to the left of the road. He stopped a moment to consider, and there was a third rifle shot. It perplexed him, but he was taking no chances.

He changed his course so as to ride behind the ridge, and the shooting continued intermittently. Once, he was sure that he heard a revolver shot, but it sounded farther away.

He left his horse before he reached the crest of the ridge and went forward on foot. He scarcely could use his left arm now, and his wound ached and throbbed. Loss of blood had weakened him, and when he tried to hurry, black waves danced before his eyes. He felt that if he let himself go he might faint. In that condition he didn't know whether he could hold a gun steady or not.

He reached the top of the ridge and flung himself down upon his face. He heard another rifle shot from just below him, and was fortunate enough to see where it hit a giant boulder on the other side of the road.

At the same time he saw two terrified, but well-trained horses standing off a few hundred yards with reins dragging, and he recognized them as Cub and Sneezer, the buggy team belonging to Dale. The horses also doubled as saddle horses when the need arose, and both wore saddles.

Instantly he comprehended the situation. There was a little creek just beyond the road, and on the other side of that a small ridge nosed down against the creek, and in a shallow swale was a conglomeration of huge boulders.

Somehow or other Dale and Rube had managed to get into those boulders after being attacked by the bushwhacker, and now the bushwhacker was moving in to shoot at the boulders from different angles, hoping to hit them with a ricocheted bullet.

For all Burr knew both Dale and Rube might now be dead, for he had heard only that one revolver shot, which he knew now must have come from the boulders.

He got to his feet and hated the weakness which he couldn't control, which made his legs tremble. He was dealing with a man who was hard and tough, and knew all the tricks of his killing trade. One missed shot, or misstep that warned his enemy, could mean doom for all of them.

Once through the first barrier the trees were larger and the going easier. He stopped behind an aspen with a trunk nearly six inches in diameter, to take his bearings and try to locate his foe.

ANOTHER shot sounded from so close in front of him that he was startled. Cowdery, he realized, was screened from him by a small chokecherry bush.

He started to move, then saw Cowdery stealing cautiously to his left. The man was forty feet away, and his back was turned to Burr. Burr took aim at the moving back, but he couldn't pull the trigger. Not without warning.

He called out, "Cowdery!"

The bushwhacker whirled, keen eyes searching out the source of the voice, rifle ready to fire. Burr saw recognition lead

into the man's eyes, and he fired as Cowdery raised the rifle. With despair in his heart he knew that he had missed.

He heard the roar of the rifle, and something hit him hard in the chest, rocking him back on his heels. Cowdery was pumping in another cartridge after ejecting the empty shell. Burr steadied his gun arm against the side of the tree and pulled the trigger.

Bill Cowdery fell upon his hands and knees, but he scrambled to get up, and Burr fired again and yet again. Each bullet, he knew, took effect, and Bill Cowdery lay upon his face.

Burr steadied himself against the tree, and then he realized why he wasn't a dead man. Cowdery's bullet had centered the tree trunk and gone clear through it before entering his body.

He walked cautiously down to his enemy, and saw that all three of his last shots had entered the man's body. Cowdery turned his head to glare up hatefully, and was dead.

Burr moved to the edge of the grove and walked slowly down through the sagebrush to the road. He hardly had started his stumbling journey before he saw Dale leave the boulders and come running to meet him. With vast relief he saw that she was all right.

"Burr! Burr!" she cried out.

She had her arms around him before he knew it, and against his will his weight sagged heavily upon her. "Oh, darling, you've been shot," she sobbed. "Lean on me, I'll get you to the road."

She had called him darling! It wasn't a word lightly used in the range country, and somehow he had never felt so happy in his life.

"What happened?" he asked. "Cowdery was shooting at you."

"And missing us by inches at every shot," she said. "Rube is pretty badly shot, too. He saved my life."

"I knew he was a good man," Burr said.

"Rube just happened to see the gun before that man fired. He was on the side next to the grove, and a little behind me. He spurred his horse up even, and the bullet hit him," she explained. "I grabbed his horse, and we just managed to get into those rocks. I guess the fellow was so excited that he missed us, but it seems like he's been shooting at us for hours."

She hadn't asked what had happened to Cowdery. She knew. And it was her six-gun which had kept the man from coming closer to finish his job.

Rube was more seriously wounded than Burr, but he wasn't hurt fatally. Somehow, Dale had contrived to stop most of the bleeding from Rube's wound, and she insisted on rendering such first aid as she could to Burr. And while she worked, he told them what had happened at the headquarters camp.

"Posey will soon be along with the wagon and he can haul Rube to town," Burr said. "If you'll get my horse I'll ride in with you."

"You'll stay here and wait for Posey," she said firmly. "I'll ride hard for help."

She brought his horse down to the road, made the two wounded men as comfortable as she could, then galloped away to Chub Springs.

JACK TALCOMB, assistant cashier at the Duclos bank, had stepped out for a beer before starting to post the books for the day after the bank had closed. As he usually did, Talcomb stopped at the Senate Saloon on the pretense that it was the nearest to the bank. Talcomb was considered a harmless fellow who used his ears more than his mouth, and he had picked up more than one bit of news there that was useful to his boss, Claude Pickard.

He was wiping the foam from his lips when he was caught up in a mild stampede to the sidewalk. Dale Eustace was out there on a roan horse that dripped sweat from its belly in streams.

Jack heard her say, "Will someone get the sheriff? Several men have been killed on the range and some more wounded."

The bartender asked, "Anything happen to Posey?"

"No. He's driving in with some dead men and some prisoners," Dale replied. "I want to find a doctor and an ambulance of

some kind. Burr Chandler and Rube Walcott have been badly wounded."

Everybody, almost, was shouting for her to tell what had happened. Jack Talcomb was saying nothing, and missing nothing. A man bumped into him trying to get closer to Dale, and Jack started to jerk the man aside, but stopped when he recognized George Leatherwood.

Aware that the crowd was determined to hear what had happened, Dale said, "All right, I'll tell you all I know, but somebody must find a doctor."

Baldy Tompson, the Senate bartender, turned to a swamper from the saloon and said, "Go git Doc Fryar. Hustle."

Dale told them in short, crisp sentences what had happened. Before she finished a hundred people had gathered.

Jack Talcomb heard every word, and when the crowd stopped listening and began to talk in excited voices, Jack slipped away and dashed hurriedly back into the bank where Claude Pickard still sat in his private office. For once Jack entered the office without a discreet knock.

"What the hell—" Pickard demanded, and caught a glimpse of his assistant's face. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Hell and damnation has broke out on the range," Talcomb blurted out. "Verne Hull, Bill Cowdery and a couple more men have been killed, and some others—"

"What? Hull and Cowdery! Who said so?"

"Dale Eustace. She just got in. She says Cowdery tried to kill her, but Burr Chandler killed him, and Chandler and Posey Mitchell killed Verne and the commissary man, and are bringing in Austin Tewkes and another man as prisoners."

It couldn't be, Pickard told himself. Hull and Cowdery were supposed to kill Dale Eustace and Burr Chandler, not get killed. He wondered desperately how deeply he had been implicated.

He heard Talcomb say that Dick Leatherwood had been killed, and his hand involuntarily moved to his throat as though he already could feel a rope there. Too many people knew how he had connived at framing young Leatherwood with a murder charge, and if Leatherwood were dead and the men he himself had depended upon were killed or taken prisoner, somebody was sure to talk.

He heard Jack saying, "George Leatherwood is in town. If I were you—"

"Get out. Let me think," Pickard barked.

Talcomb retired fearfully to his own desk. No sooner had he seated himself than the door of the bank opened and George Leatherwood came in

Talcomb leaped to his feet. "Here, here," he said, "you can't come in. This bank is closed."

Leatherwood paid no attention. He crossed the floor in long strides and flung open the door of Pickard's private office. Talcomb moved swiftly to the cashier's window, opened a drawer underneath and pulled out a .38 caliber revolver he kept there for emergencies.

Pickard was on his feet when George Leatherwood burst in on him. "What's the meaning of this intrusion?" he demanded.

"My brother is dead, and you're responsible for it," George said. "I've come to kill you, Pickard."

Pickard reached for the gun in a shoulder holster under his coat, but George fired before he could draw the gun clear. The muzzle of George's big .44 was almost against Pickard's breast, and it tore a terrific hole. George fired again and again until every bullet that had been in the gun was in Pickard's body.

Outside, Jack Talcomb stood paralyzed by terror. Then he saw Leatherwood coming out of the office, shoving his gun back in the holster.

"You—you killed Claude," Talcomb mouthed, and raising his gun he fired a bullet into George Leatherwood's heart.

BURR WAS resting easily in the Chub Springs hospital the next morning when the nurse said, "You have a visitor." Before she could say who it was, Leona Pickard stepped past the nurse and, bending down, kissed him on the mouth. The nurse discreetly retired and closed the door.

"Oh, my poor darling," Leona said. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't married Claude like a silly fool none of this would have happened."

"Not your fault, Leona," he said. "You couldn't foresee what would happen, and you had a right to marry anyone you wanted to."

"You're the only man I ever loved, Burr," she said. "I'm free now, and we can start over where we left off. I promise I'll make everything right, darling, and I'll be a good wife to you."

Burr felt that he would rather be facing Bill Cowdery's bullets than this tearful woman. But try as he might, he could arouse no feeling within himself for her, except pity.

"I'm afraid we can't take up where we left off, Leona," he said. "Too much has happened."

"Nothing has happened that can't be cured," she said desperately. "Listen: I got hold of that check Dick was supposed to have raised, and I was going to prove that Claude did it. Dick and George are both dead, but I'm going to see that Annie gets the Seventy back. And I can let you have money to pay your debts.

Burr hated to say the words he had to say. "I can't take your money, Leona, and I can't marry you."

Anger swept fiercely across her face. "It's that sheep heiress!" she cried. "She's fooled you. Do you think for a minute that a woman like her would ever marry a cowhand?"

"No, I don't. But she hasn't fooled me."

"Then you are a fool," she said. "You think you're going to borrow money from the new bank at Topaz. Well, do you know who owns that bank? She does. And if she loans you money it'll be for just one reason. So she can break you and put sheep on Rock River."

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"She told me so herself."

"That she was going to break me?"

"No, but she told me she was starting that bank, and there could be only one rea-

[*Turn page*]

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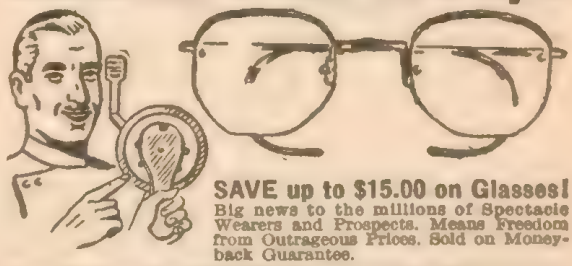

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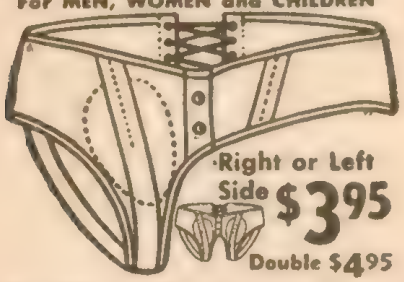

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son. Don't you know that you can never trust anybody who runs sheep?"

Burr wasn't too much surprised by what she had told him. He knew that somebody was backing Dollenmeyer, and he had wondered if that person was Dale.

He said quietly, "I would rather borrow money from a bank she owns than take money Claude Pickard had his hands on."

"All right, Burr." She sighed dramatically. "I can see that sheep woman has you hogtied. I hope she won't hurt you too much." With her head high she turned and left the room.

For a while Burr felt pretty badly, but he knew Leona, and she would recover. She was young and pretty, and she had money. A girl like that wouldn't stay unmarried long. Then he began worrying why Dale hadn't been in to see him.

SHE DIDN'T appear until noon the next day. She still wore her riding costume, but it didn't hurt her trim, graceful figure in the least. She was, however, more reserved than he had ever seen her.

She asked how he was doing and volunteered the information that she had talked with the doctor who told her that his wounds were not at all serious.

"I've just been in to see Rube Walcott, and he's getting along all right, too."

"That's good," he said, noting she had stopped to see Rube before she had him.

She said, "I'm going to make Rube my sheep foreman just as soon as he is able to get around. So you can't hire him after all."

"He'll be a good man."

"But until then I'll have to look after after things myself," she said. "I just got back back from the range. Took back the old herders and fired those gunmen Tewkes hired. And you may be interested to know that I talked with your riders."

"You did?"

"I told them that since the sheep are no longer quarantined we are pulling off your range just as fast as we possibly can. They're looking after the Seventy cattle,

too, until Annie Leatherwood decides what to do. I feel terribly sorry for Annie."

"So do I."

Conversation suddenly was hard to make. Burr was thinking of the way she had called him darling.

Finally he said, "I hear you are opening a bank in Topaz. If so, I expect I'll be around trying to get a loan."

"Your credit is good." She smiled. "And I suppose that after a while you and Mrs. Pickard will be getting married."

Burr suddenly felt as if a pleasant electric vibration had reached clear down to his toes. Dale was jealous.

"Leona will marry somebody," he said, "but it won't be me—darling."

There was a shine to her eyes that he had never seen before. "Are you just saying that because I called you darling the other day?" she inquired.

"Just partly. If you hadn't, maybe I wouldn't have the courage to tell you now that if it wasn't for your money I'd ask you to marry me."

"What's money got to do with it?" she demanded snappily. "You can run your cattle, and I'll run my sheep—till we make other arrangements."

"Such as—a family?" he queried.

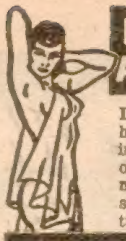
She bent over and kissed him then, and her cheeks were quite red when she raised her head. "A big family," she said. "And the sooner we get started at it the better."

The End

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 83)

1. Braceros (brah-SAY-ros).
2. White shorthorns, a Scottish breed.
3. Hind legs. The ailment is not unlike St. Vitus dance.
4. Flame red.
5. Because the meat of an adult buck killed during mating season has a strong, disagreeable flavor.
6. Wyoming.
7. He meant that the horse jerks back, or sets back, on the halter rope when led, sometimes throwing himself down, and always making him hard to lead.
8. California.
9. A cow. In fact a cow compelled to lie flat with her neck outstretched for very long is likely to bloat and die. Horses, however, like to sun themselves at full length.
10. "Ride."



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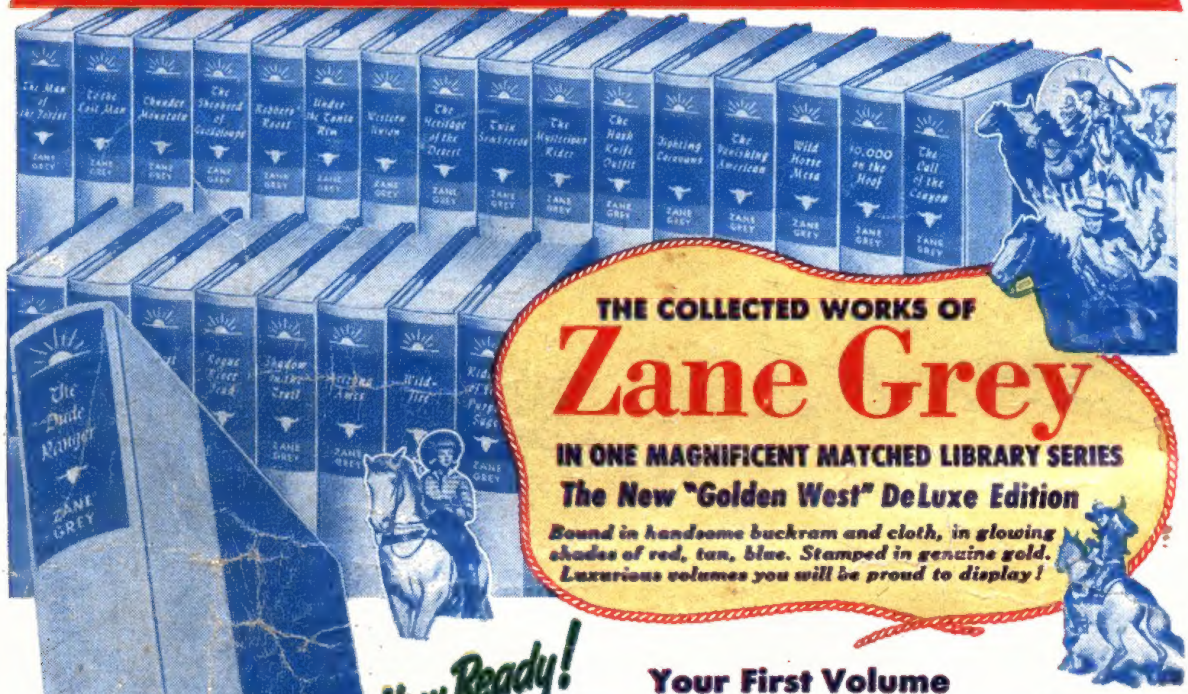

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